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**Abstract**

Organizations are in a war for talent, as changing demographics, globalization and increasing workforce mobility are decreasing the supply of talented young professionals. This intensifying competition over job applicants has driven organizations to develop ways to differentiate and increase their attractiveness. One way to do this is through development of positive employer image. Recruitment process has been identified as a major determinant of applicants' employer images. Recruitment process does not anymore only stand for an opportunity for the employer to evaluate applicants, but also as an opportunity for applicants to critically evaluate the employer.

Therefore, this study was taken to extend the previous research on how employer image is formed during recruitment process and clarify what can actually be done to contribute to formation of favorable employer image by examining how applicants interpret, value and perceive different cues they receive during the process. In fulfilling the study purpose, recruitment and employer image literatures were merged and as a result the interest was centralized in detecting what specifically is the role of communication, applicant's personal experience on individual recruitment activities as well as symbolic and instrumental attributes in this equation. Qualitative interviews were conducted to study the phenomena in the eyes of job applicants.

The empirical research identified that employer image develops according to different characteristics of recruitment process which taken together forms a holistic employer image. More precisely it was found that during variety of recruitment activities individuals receive messages that contain attributes based on which applicants make conclusions about the employer. Taking a closer look, the evidence highlighted the role of current employees as employer image ambassadors. Additionally, communication evolving around recruitment was identified as a central determinant of employer image. Furthermore, based on the findings, organizations are encouraged to explore and promote symbolic attributes such as atmosphere while seeking differentiation. Taken together, organizations can design and implement interventions in each phase of recruitment to contribute towards formation of clear and favorable employer image. This study was performed in the context of KIBS industry and the empirical evidence was collected by observing perceptions of recent or soon to be graduates. For future research it is recommendable to widen the research context.

Key words	employer image, recruitment activities, personal experience, recruitment communication, instrumental-symbolic framework
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**Tiivistelmä**

Työmarkkinoilla yrityksiä haastaa koventunut kilpailu työvoimasta, jota kiihdyttää väestön ikääntyminen, globalisaatio ja kasvava työvoiman liikkuminen. Voimistuva kilpailu nuorista lahjakkaista työnhakijoista on ajanut yritykset kehittämään keinoja erottuakseen kilpailijoista ja lisätäkseen houkuttelevuutta. Yritykset voivat vastata nykypäivän rekrytoinnin haasteisiin työnantajamielikuvan kehittämisen kautta. Rekrytointiprosessi onkin tunnistettu mahdollisuudeksi muokata työnhakijoiden työnantajamielikuvia yrityksestä. Nykypäivänä rekrytointiprosessi ei ainoastaan toimi yrityksille mahdollisuutena arvioida työnhakijoita, vaan myös mahdollisuutena työnhakijoille arvioida kriittisesti työnantajia.

Tässä tutkimuksessa pyritäänkin lisäämään tietoa siitä, kuinka työnantajamielikuva muodostuu rekrytointiprosessissa ja mitä yritykset voivat käytännössä tehdä edistääkseen mielekkään työnantajamielikuvan kehittymistä. Tätä varten analysoidaan ja kuvataan sitä, kuinka työnhakijat tarkastelevat, tulkitsevat ja arvioivat eri signaaleja, joita he saavat rekrytointiprosessin aikana. Tutkimuksen tavoitteiden mukaisesti rekrytointi- sekä työnantajamielikuvakirjallisuudet yhdistettiin. Alustavien löydösten mukaan mielenkiinto kohdistettiin tutkimaan kommunikaation, yksittäisten rekrytointitoimenpiteiden sekä symbolisten ja instrumentaalisten piirteiden roolia työnantajamielikuvan rakentumisessa. Empiirinen aineisto kerättiin laadullisilla yksilöhaastatteluilla, jotta tutkittavaa ilmiötä pystyttiin tarkasteleman työnhakijoiden näkökulmasta.

Tutkimuksessa havaittiin, että työnantajamielikuva rakentuu kokonaisarviosta rekrytoinnissa käytetyistä toimenpiteistä ja piirteistä. Eri rekrytointitoimenpiteiden aikana hakija saa tietoa, joka sisältää viitteitä eri piirteistä, minkä perusteella hakija tekee johtopäätöksiä työnantajasta. Tutkimustulokset korostavat erityisesti nykyisten työntekijöiden roolia työnantajamielikuvan muodostumisessa sekä kommunikaation merkittävää vaikutusta tässä yhtälössä. Tutkimustuloksiin perustuen yrityksiä kannustetaan tuomaan esille erityisesti symbolisia, aineettomia piirteitä kuten hyvää työilmapiiriä, tavoittellessaan erottumista kilpailijoista. Yritykset voivat suunnitella ja implementoida keinoja jokaisessa rekrytoinnin vaiheessa edistääkseen selkeän ja mielekkään työnantajamielikuvan muodostumista. Tämä tutkimus toteutettiin tietointensiivisen toimialan kontekstissa ja aineistoa kerättiin vastavalmistuneilta ja pian valmistuvilta työnhakijoilta. Jatkotutkimusmahdollisuuksia löytyisikin tutkimuskontekstin laajentamisesta.

Asiasanat	työnantaja mielikuva, rekrytointitoimenpiteet, henkilökohtainen kokemus, rekrytointi kommunikaatio, instrumentaalisen ja symbolisen ulottuvuuden viitekehys
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**UNIVERSITY  
OF TURKU**

Turku School of  
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# **EMPLOYER IMAGE FORMATION DURING RECRUITMENT**

**Perceptions of young professionals in knowledge-intensive  
services**

Master's Thesis  
in International Business

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# 1 INTRODUCTION

## 1.1 Background for the study

During past decades there has accumulated considerable evidence on that organizations' human resource (HR) functions globally are facing variety of challenges due to the dynamic nature of our modern environment (Burke & Ng 2006; Kauhanen 2012; Theurer et al. 2018; Intindola et al. 2019). Several factors have come together to impact the practice of human resource management (HRM) in organizations (Burke & Ng 2006). HR managers are battling with attracting and retaining talent as the labor markets are increasingly characterized with intense competition due to globalization, changing demographics and increasing work force mobility (Wilden et al. 2010; Maurya & Agarwal 2018). Due to these factors the demand for highly skilled, internationally marketable and mobile individuals tends to be exceeding the supply (Knox & Freeman 2006). In 1998, Chambers et al. first conceptualized this phenomenon as the *war for talent*. Nor did the authors only introduce the concept but they also correctly predicted that the war would continue to intensify in the future. Recent study of ManpowerGroup found that the global talent shortage has nearly doubled in the past decade (ManpowerGroup 2018). This suggests that the ongoing and yet intensifying war for talent is continuing to create its own challenges in the world of recruitment. Irrespective to the economic downturns and blooms, there always remains demand for talent. Organizations internationally continue facing intensifying competition for talent, which highlights the importance of standing out from the crowded labor market. So how will organizations be able to win the war for talent and secure attraction and retainment of the right people to build success in their future?

Given this struggle that organizations are facing hiring and retaining talent due to the tight labor market, it is critical that organizations make recruitment a top priority. Mastering recruitment is becoming more vital as high workforce mobility seems to be evolving as a permanent trend in labor markets (Kauhanen 2012; Theurer et al. 2018; Intindola et al. 2019). In fact, recruitment has been argued to be the most critical human resource function for organizational success (Orlitzky 2007, 275) and this may explain why the number presenting investments made on recruitment is often a significant one (Taylor & Bergmann 1987). Nevertheless, organizations yet continue flounder among these fundamental external environmental changes. Especially in the employment markets characterized with high competition attracting suitable human resources is becoming more problematic. One critical cause behind this increased competition over employees is the aging of worldwide population (Wilden et al. 2010). Additionally, applicants are gaining more leverage as it is now more convenient and easier to take one's

knowledge elsewhere if recruitment process is experienced negatively. That being said it may be argued that it is crucial for organizations to identify recruitment processes that assure successful talent attraction and provide well-established premises for the retention of the attracted talent.

Especially highly skilled applicants, due to high demand, are now able to evaluate potential employers rather critically. Organizations are therefore required to detect means to differentiate themselves in order to stand out in these competitive markets. Past literature has identified employer image as a mean to differentiate from competitors as it can be used to highlight unique aspects of employment offerings (Tikoo & Backhaus 2004). According to Schwaiger (2004) strong images may create competitive advantages to an organization as image is difficult to imitate and therefore provides means for differentiation (Agrawal & Swaroop 2011). According to Cable and Turban (2011) applicants' perceptions on employer may create value for organization as they determine whether they accept job from the employer. Lievens and Slaughter (2016) have identified that enhanced recruitment outcomes, stronger emotional bonds and financial results as results of favorable employer image. Therefore, in the light of ever-growing talent shortage employer image may serve as a potential competitive advantage to beat the war for talent. It may therefore be argued that organizations should be actively seeking means to create favorable employer image and recruitment provides convenient platform for this. Organizations do recognize this increasing importance of having positive employer image, however there still remains gap on how this objective may be achieved.

What has been found is that recruitment process has an influence on employer image formation (Lievens & Slaughter 2016). However, little is known of how employer image perceptions are founded or created even though it has been well-established early on that applicants form impressions on organizations during recruitment (Connerley & Rynes 1997). Lievens and Slaughter also continued arguing that the influence of organizational processes on organizational images remains rather little studied (Lievens & Slaughter 2016). Past literature has been able to identify individual components that play a role in image formation during recruitment, however how employer image actually develops remains not fully understood. Dowling (1986) identified communication and personal experience as two major components of image perceptions (Dowling 1986). Dowling (1986) further argued that it is important to first allocate the major elements influencing image formation before being able to determine suitable way-forward for strengthening it to a desired direction. That being said, this research will utilize these already detected findings and focus on studying the influence of communication and personal experience of recruitment on perceived employer image. Understanding of how organizations may leverage these major components during recruitment processes to create strong employer

images may assist organization in securing competitive advantage over rivalries and beat the war for talent.

It seems that it is evident that recruitment has an effect on job seekers' employer image, however the literature yet remains hollow on the holistic impact of these individual components and their interplay. It also remains unstudied how these activities should be arranged so that they would support in creating positive image. Increased knowledge on how organizations may support creation of positive employer image during recruitment to improve organizational attractiveness would provide HR professionals more information to rely on, in addition to their experience and intuition. Therefore, this study focuses on detecting how recruitment activities may influence employer image and applicants' perception of it. The objective of this research is to study recruitment process, identify its main variables and detect cause and effect -relationships between these and applicant perceptions. The significance of this research comes from the new research context, the unused combination of existing theories and the topicality of the research subject due to intensifying competition on competent applicants in the international labor market. After familiarizing oneself with this study the reader will have greater competence in considering formation of employer image and hence, better ability to reshape recruitment process to achieve wider benefits, master recruitment and beat the intense war for talent.

## **1.2 Problem setting**

There is evident research gap in past literature on investigating factors that can be used to constitute employee attractiveness (Sommer et al. 2017). Hence, this study will focus on how organizations may enhance their employer image in the context of recruitment to assure successful vacancy fulfillment. Knox and Freeman (2010) in their study of measuring employer image identified the need for future study to focus on ascertaining what are the specific factors of recruitment, whether process or people related, that contribute to image creation. Identifying such factors may allow greater success and efficiency in recruitment. Later in 2016, Lievens and Slaughter pointed that literature yet remains hollow on the influence of specific practices or processes on the formation of organizational images. This study will take a focus on this research gap and study recruitment and its influence on employer image. More precisely the focus will be in studying the influence of communication and personal experience during recruitment on formation of employer image perceptions.

In line with the identified research gap, the objective of this study is to identify factors that influence employer image and gain understanding how these factors together form employer image, by capturing the perspectives of prospective employees. The managerial

objective is to provide insights for HR professionals on how to arrange recruitment to create strong and positive employer image. With these objectives in mind the main research question is defined as:

- *How employer image develops during recruitment?*

The sub-questions are defined as following:

- *What is the role of communication in shaping employer image during recruitment?*
- *How does the applicant's personal experience on used recruitment activities influence employer image formation?*
- *What is the role of instrumental and symbolic attributes in building employer image during recruitment?*

This research lies on an assumption that recruitment process has an influence on employer image, as this has been argued multiple times in the past literature (Dowling 1986; Kauhanen 2012; Honkala et al. 2014; Lievens & Slaughter 2016). It is expected that negative recruitment experiences may have critical influence on employer image. In addition, there is a strong belief that improving employer image is possible by exploiting certain recruitment practices however, will require extra efforts. This is because certain recruitment activities such as communication (Dowling 1986) have been found to have an influence on applicants' employer image. The explorative nature of this research however allows the potential for all outcomes. Additionally, the explorative nature and the methodological choices, that will be justified in chapter 5, have allowed the main and sub research questions to reshape in the course of research progress.

To answer the research questions this study first draws on existing literature to explain the current knowledge on recruitment and employer image. In order to keep the study focused and assure that eventually practical implications will be achieved the research context was focused. According to Breaugh (2008) little attention has been given on applicants while exploring the effectiveness of recruitment. Therefore, this study takes an applicant perspective. The interest is in understanding the way in which applicants understand that recruitment process influences their perceptions of an employer. Additionally, the study is conducted in the context of external recruitment and will therefore only concentrate on studying the influence of recruitment on external employer image. The objective of external recruitment process is to recruit individuals that are not yet employed to an organization but are seeking position within (Taylor & Collins 2000).

Moreover, this study is interested in employer image perceptions of young, recently graduated or soon to graduate professionals. It has been found that inexperienced applicants in crowded marketplaces are likely to encounter difficulties with comparing possible employers through actual attributes available because many are unfamiliar or unknown. Because of this they are likely to rely on intangible factors such as employer image to guide them through decision-making process (Colins & Stevens 2002). On a similar note, Kauhanen (2012, 69) argue that employer image influences especially employer decisions of young professionals. Hence, it is especially important when recruiting young professionals that recruitment activities are arranged in such a way that they create positive employer image. Finally, according to Barber (1998) recruitment research calls for great attention to the context in which recruitment occurs, which is why one industry, knowledge-intensive business services (KIBS), was selected as the research environment. The reasons why KIBS industry was found as appropriate basis for this study will be presented in the next chapter.

### **1.3 Recruitment in knowledge-intensive business services**

The reason why KIBS industry was chosen as the research context for this study is because past literature has found considerable evidence on the importance of studying employer image and recruitment in KIBS industry (Collins & Stevens 2002; Richter et al. 2008). The data for this study has been collected from recruitment processes of a large multinational organization operating in KIBS sector. The company has worldwide presence and provides professional and consulting services including advisory services. The company wishes to remain anonymous and therefore the nature of the company or its services will not be further elaborated. The particular case company was selected due to its international presence and resource availability. The international presence of the case organization is believed to allow potential for wider exploitation of the findings. Employer image tends to be globally considered as individual job applicants tend to commonly consider of applying to a company x, rather than only to company x's specific country branch. This may indicate that research done based on data collected from one country branch may be used to benefit the whole company internationally.

Particularly with organizations operating in fast growing markets, such as KIBS market, the importance of studying recruitment should be highlighted (Grimshaw & Miozzo 2009). Furthermore, Behrends (2007) argues that recruitment processes in KIBS firms should deserve high level of attention as in these industries there exists close connection between sustainable organizational success and the quality of acquired talent. Sommer et al. (2017) over more state that recruiting high potential is the foundation for creating knowledge and competitive advantages in organizations operating in KIBS

industries. A firm may have the capital and technology but it is its human resources that will eventually help the firm face the challenges of business globalization (Raduan & Kumar 2006). Even though today digital systems increasingly allow encoding of knowledge, the largest part yet remains embedded in the skills and expertise of individuals. According to Di Maria et al. (2012, 15) the main principle of KIBS in fact is to bear in a situation in which the knowledge residing inside the company exceeds the knowledge of its clients. By mastering recruitment KIBS firms are able to influence the amount and quality of knowledge they possess. This may explain why KIBS organizations are likely to require heavy investment on recruitment.

In KIBS industry where one of the most important assets is employees, organizations are currently facing difficulties due to demographic changes as we are witnessing evermore smaller supply of younger workers whereas baby boomers are retiring (Sommer et al. 2017). In addition, sustained economic growth is increasing the importance of finding successful recruitment practices to beat the competition and secure highly skilled individuals from the shrunken talent pool for knowledge-based jobs (Collins & Stevens 2002). The demographic evolution and sustained economic growth together with globalization are leading KIBS organizations to battles across the world in the war for talent. Hence, what creates further challenges to attracting talent in this industry is that competition on the best applicants occurs increasingly not only inside of national borders but also internationally. The scale of international workforce mobility is rising due to factors such as globalization, career progression and cultural exploration (Habti & Elo 2018, 2). Additionally, new incentives such as standardization of certifiable degrees and introduction of free movement programs are allowing the growth of international highly skilled mobility (Petersen & Puliga 2017). Therefore, it may be concluded that organizations operating in the KIBS industries are in high pressure of acquiring the most talented applicants from the competitive international labor market and hence, it is particularly important to detect means in these industries to beat the war for talent.

Due to the above reasons it is even more important in these industries to find ways for mastering recruitment. One way to differentiate from the crowded employer pool is through intangible features including employer image. This is also beneficial as it is extremely difficult for others to copy intangible benefits. Studying how employer image develops during recruitment and how organizations can contribute to creating positive employer image may provide organizations in KIBS industry a way to beat the increased competition over employees. Assuming that otherwise competitors in an industry would offer similar tangible factors such as even salaries, an organization with a highly positive employer image in theory could achieve a position in which it could select the most talented applicants over competitors. This could furthermore then lead to increased organizational performance, especially in the knowledge intensive sectors.

## **1.4 Structure of the study**

The first chapter has provided the background of the research problem and justified the critical need for further study in the established research context. Additionally, it has indicated the relevance of the research problem to the field of international recruitment. Chapter two discusses the main concept of this study: employer image. It also introduces what is currently known about formation of employer image. Following this discussion, chapter three provides thorough explanation of the main context in which employer image will be studied in this study: recruitment. It presents the fundamentals of recruitment research and introduces main recruitment activities. Furthermore, chapter four combines employer image and recruitment literatures and discusses what is known about their interplay to this date and what yet remains unexplained.

Moving forward chapter five justifies the methodological choices of this study. It explains why qualitative research method was selected and why semi-structured interviews were found most appropriate method for the research subject. In addition, the data collection and analysis processes are described in detail. Lastly, to enhance the reliability it presents critical evaluation of trustworthiness of this study. Chapter six then presents the key findings of this study followed by chapter seven that provides the conclusions of this study. While doing this, it reflects the discussion in the literature chapters, chapter two, three and four, with the empirical findings of this study that are presented in chapter six. Chapter seven also discusses research limitations and presents suggestions for future research. Finally, chapter eight provides a summary on the above.

## **2 EMPLOYER IMAGE FORMATION**

### **2.1 Employer image and related concepts**

Employer image is one of the possible images that individuals may hold of an organization and therefore it has been described as a part of broader multidimensional construct of organizational image (Lievens & Slaughter 2016). Organizational image has been defined as mental model of individuals that is created through information from several public sources (Schuler 2004) and as the reflection of external appraisals of an organization (Wan et al. 2015). What is common with all organizational images, including employer image, is that image is a construct of information available about an organization at a given time (Gatewood et al. 1993). One of the biggest concerns of organizations is whether individuals will as a consequence of available information, have good or bad will towards them. This is because organizational image influences intentions to establish contact or conduct transactions with a company (Schuler 2004). For job applicants this refers to the intentions to seek a position in an organization.

In addition to categorizing employer image as dimension of organizational image, past literature has also categorized employer image as a dimension of employer knowledge. Employer knowledge contains all memories and associations with organization as an employer. Employer knowledge may be divided into three smaller dimensions of employer image, employer familiarity and employer reputation. Employer familiarity only refers to level of awareness, employer reputation to public evaluation and employer image to the content of perceptions of individual applicants about an organization as an employer. (Lievens et al. 2005.) Cabel and Turban (2001) in their definition of employer image add that employer image refers not only to beliefs about an organization, but also to beliefs about a particular job and people who work in the organization. Furthermore, Van Hove et al. (2013) describes employer image as individual's perceptions of what is distinctive, central and enduring about an organization as a place of work. This study relies on a definition of employer image presented by Lievens and Slaughter (2016) according to which employer image is mental representations of specific aspects of a company as an employer held by an individual. This interpretation was found most suitable in relation to the research aim as the objective is to understand on what influences employer image formation by examining it through applicants' perceptions.

Organizations often want to support talent attraction by developing attractive employer image, however they wish to ensure that the image is in line with current employees' views of the organization (Lievens et al. 2007). Therefore, employer image is not only something that individuals inside the organization possess but also something that is



likely to be created to external individuals who for one reason or another are in contact with the organization. In fact, past literature has identified two separate dimensions of employer image (Knox & Freeman 2006). External employer image refers to an image of an organization as an employer that individuals outside of the organization have. While internal employer image has been referred to as organization's identity that consists of perceptions of individuals inside of an organization. However, whether external or internal, there exist the following central elements of employer image: it is held by individuals, it is cognitive in its nature, it might fluctuate and it rather targets specific aspects than general impressions. (Lievens & Slaughter 2016.) As mentioned, as this study is interested in the perceptions of individual job applicants during external recruitment the focus will be on studying external employer image.

There exists variety of concepts that are related to employer image and these concepts are often used interchangeably. This has created confusion in the past literature and therefore to increase clarity, it is believed to be beneficial here to define some of the closely related concepts. The below table presents the definitions used in this study for employer image and related concepts.

Table 1 Defining employer image and related concepts

Construct	Definition
Employer image	“Amalgamation of transient mental representations of specific aspects of a company as an employer as held by individual constituents.” (Lievens & Slaughter 2016, 409)
Employer branding	“A targeted long-term strategy to manage awareness and perceptions of employees, potential employees and related stakeholders with regards to a particular firm.” (Sullivan 2004)
Organizational image	“What organizational members believe to be the way others view their organization.” (Wan et al. 2015, 206)
Employer reputation	“A global, temporally stable, evaluative judgement about an organization that is shared by the general public (or by multiple constituencies such as job seekers).” (Highhouse et al. 2009, 1482)
Employer familiarity	“Cognitive evaluation of whether or not job seekers are aware of the organization.” (Lievens & Slaughter 2016, 409)
Employer identity	“Organization’s central, enduring, and distinctive characteristics that organizational insiders perceive to be core.” (Lievens & Slaughter 2016, 410)
Employer knowledge	“Job seeker’s memories and associations regarding an organization.” (Cable & Turban 2001, 123)

A concept that can be often seen used hand in hand with employer image is employer branding, defined in table 1. During past decades the scientific interest in employer image has been mirrored by the rise of employer branding (Lievens & Slaughter 2016). Mandhanya and Shah (2010) elaborate the connection between employer image and employer branding by stating that developing image as an employer is part of employer branding. This definition indicates the cause-effect relationship between employer branding and employer image. Whereas employer branding serves as means, employer

image serves as end. Employer branding has been described as the process of creating unique and attractive image of a company as an employer (Theurer et al. 2018). Therefore, studies of individuals' perceptions on employer image originate with recruitment researchers. In this study employer branding is defined according to widely referenced (i.e. Backhaus & Tikoo 2004; Figurska & Matuska 2013; Sengupta et al. 2015) definition presented by Dr. John Sullivan in 2004. According to this definition employer branding is a strategy of managing awareness and perceptions of stakeholders. This definition emphasizes employer branding as a process towards an end-result. According to Mandhanya and Shah (2010) employer branding has become a top priority for organizations in their pursuit to win the war for talent. By successful employer branding organizations can create favorable employer images that attract prospective candidates. This over more assist with challenges connected to unprecedented talent demand and shrinking applicant pool. This distinction between employer image and employer branding as well as the relation of employer image to other related concepts is illustrated in the below figure.

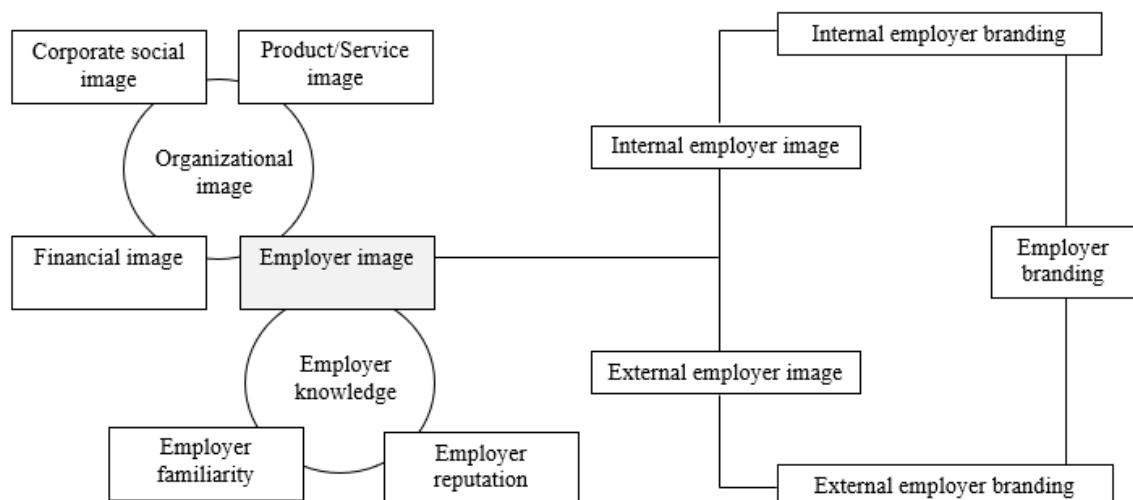


Figure 1 Employer image and its relation to related concepts

Figure 1 elaborates the categorization of employer image as dimensions of two broader concepts: organizational image and employer knowledge. Employer image is one of the possible images that organizations may have and it is also part of broader concept of employer knowledge that contains all job seeker's memories and associations of an organization. Furthermore, as mentioned, there are two types of employer images: external and internal employer image. Organizations can aim to influence both through internal or external employer branding. Employer branding on the other hand is an umbrella term that contains both.

Then why should organizations aim for strong and positive employer image? In order to beat the war for talent organizations are required to differentiate – stand out from the

labor market that is crowded with employers competing over prospective employees. Organization can be considered to have a positive employer image when individuals' mental representations of a company as an employer are positive or favorable. Positive employer image helps therefore organizations to recruit talent as it may be expected to increase organizational attractiveness. Variety of studies have argued that employer image is central determinant of the level of organizational attractiveness (Gatewood et al. 1993; Cable & Turban 2001; Elving et al. 2013). One of the most basic findings in psychological research is that people tend to find themselves in environments that correspond with their personal values and needs (Cable & Turban 2001). This explains why individuals find certain organizations more attractive than others. Especially in KIBS industry having a positive employer image can be a major advantage while recruiting. In this industry it is likely that organizations are offering similar tangible benefits such as salaries for young job seekers and therefore positive employer image can serve as a strong point of differentiation.

Organization's employer image is likely to have an influence on the behavior of individuals towards the organization (Dowling 1986). Positive employer image benefits organizations as applicants become quicker decision makers because it becomes easier to distinguish among potential employers. It furthermore tends to assist with creating stronger emotional bonds with employed applicants and therefore leads to enhanced overall organizational performance. (Lievens & Slaughter 2016). Robertson (2013) has identified that positive employer image leads to benefits such as improved employee satisfaction and commitment as well as increased productivity and employee retention. That being said, it may be argued that organizations should aim for implementation of processes that have been found to lead to formation positive employer image.

It may be concluded from the above that employer image refers to mental associations and more precisely to attributes that individual associates with the organization as a place to work. There exist variety of categorizations of these attributes, however one of the most well-established and studied categorization of these attributes is distinction into instrumental and symbolic dimensions (Lievens & Slaughter 2016). Inspired by Lievens et al. (2007) this research utilizes the division of employer image associations to instrumental and symbolic distinctions while aiming to understand employer image formation further.

## **2.2 Symbolic and instrumental dimensions of employer image**

According to Van Hove and Saks (2011) employer image consists of instrumental and symbolic attributes. The principle that people associate with both instrumental and

symbolic distinctions with objects originates from traditional social psychology (Van Hove et al. 2013). Instrumental attributes refer to descriptions of an organization in terms of objectives, concrete and factual matters. Taking a more practical view, instrumental factors refer to matters such as pay and advancement opportunities and applicants are often evaluating these on the basis of guaranteeing that benefits outweigh costs. For example, when visiting company premises individuals draw conclusions of the employer based on location and office design. Instrumental attributes alone can't explain employer image perceptions but individuals also draw conclusions of an employer based on symbolic attributes (Lievens & Highhouse 2003).

Symbolic attributes refer to subjective, abstract and intangible attributes. Symbolic attributes represent the feelings and thoughts that individuals create while evaluating an organization. (Backhaus & Tikoo 2004). For example while interacting with employees, individuals form perceptions about level of transparency, atmosphere, team spirit and reputation. According to Backhaus and Tikoo (2004) much of the strength of creating favorable employer image perceptions lies within the symbolic attributes. Unlike instrumental features symbolic features are more challenging to control. As mentioned in industries where there is less room for competing on tangible assets the importance of intangible assets is increased. This may be particularly relevant in KIBS industry as it seems that in terms of factors such as salary or benefit packages the major players in the industry are able to provide more or less similar offers. Therefore, in order to differentiate from the competition, they may need to compete increasingly on symbolic features. That being said it may be concluded that organizations are able to influence their employer image by promoting certain attributes. However before detecting means to enhance and manage organizational images organizations must understand how these images are formed.

### **2.3 Employer image formation**

When individuals come in contact with a company and related communications, impression of the enterprise is automatically formed and the image formation will start. Where as earlier discussed employer branding is active process that consists of measures that organizations take to improve employer image, employer image formation is a passive process that occurs even though organization would not actively try to build an employer image. Kauhanen (2012, 69-70) has identified factors such as public presence, industry, experiences of former and current employees and even location to have an influence on employer image formation. As mentioned before, this study takes an applicant perspective to studying how employer image develops during recruitment and

is interested in its subjective views of job seekers. Therefore, the term employer image formation is put in the center of this study.

In order for employer image formation to be possible, the first-place individual must have a basic awareness of an employer and therefore employer familiarity is a precursor of employer image (Cable and Turban 2001). Without familiarity to an organization, an individual doesn't have a platform to collect and store information about an employer. When employer familiarity exists, only then formation of employer image may begin. According to Agrawal and Swaroop (2011), employer image is formed through awareness of an employer and through feelings towards and knowledge of the employer. Employers are able to strengthen certain associates connected to their image by investing in communicating these (Drury 2016).

Knowledge on factors that influence employer image formation can be used to design interventions for shaping it (Lievens & Slaughter 2016). According to Backhaus and Tikoo (2004), brand associates are the determinants of the organizations' images. These associates refer to the ideas and thoughts that evolve in an individual's mind when the company name is heard. Organizations may attempt to control the types of information disseminated to people about the company to influence images created. Organizations must start with acknowledging the current images and detect those factors on which they are based on (Dowling 1986). According to Robertson (2013), it is important to fully understand the current image that an individual possesses because if the organizational delivery doesn't match this initial image, there will be formed cognitive dissonance where expectations and reality doesn't match. In case the expectations are more beneficial than the reality, the consequences are likely impairing.

Long-held conclusion in the literature was that organizational images are mostly constructed by organizations, but in fact later on it was found that images are the creation of combination of multiple factors such as personal and environmental factors (Williams & Moffitt 1997). Interestingly, the authors describe image formation as a complex process that combines several factors. Images are therefore vulnerable to outside factors and therefore are impossible to be fully controlled. Dowling's (1986) model of image formation process was used as an inspiration for creating the below figure 2 to demonstrate the influence of controllable and non-controllable factors that play a part in employer image formation. Employer image is influenced by how an organization wishes its employer image to be perceived (controllable factors) and how external groups perceive its image (uncontrollable factors).

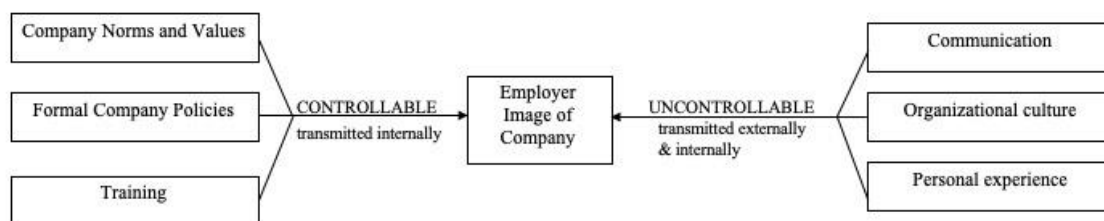


Figure 2 Controllable and uncontrollable factors influencing employer image

Employers can use the controllable factors, identified on the left side of figure 2, to promote desirable image. However, according to Bukowska (2014) only organizations who know how they would like to be perceived are actually able to change their employer image in the labor market. Therefore, once organization has identified the current employer image individuals have on it the next step is to determine what is the desirable image that will be pursued (Kauhanen 2012, 69-70). Through formal company criteria and established company norms and values, organizations can have an influence on what type of employer image is formed (Dowling 1986). According to Foster et al. (2011) organizations must aim for brand promise and employee values that facilitate the desired image. Additionally, Robertson (2013) has identified training as a mean through which organization can have significant influence on its employer image.

Formal company policies, company norms and values as well as training were identified as controllable means as organizations are able to fully control these. Organizations can transmit policies, practices and principles internally to employees and that way have a controlled influence on its employer image. Kauhanen (2012, 69-70) has identified that controlled process of reshaping employer image is often highly time consuming, but on the contrary small breach, such as unequal or illegal treatment during recruitment, can quickly impair employer image. The challenge with employer image formation therefore seems to be that desirable image takes time and efforts to be built but once built is highly vulnerable for even smallest misbehaviors. Hence, it is important that organizations actively pay attention to the controllable factors through which they have the ability to influence their employer image.

In addition to controllable factors applicants' perceptions on employer image are also submit to external influencers that remain beyond organization's reach (Dowling 1986). As this study takes individual applicant not company perspective in studying employer image and how it is formed the focus will be on the uncontrollable factors influencing employer image. These factors can be seen in the right side of figure 2. One of the main reasons why organizations are not able to fully control employer image formation is because there are various of information sources that are not firm-controlled (Dowling 1986). There exists internal and external communication and both can have influence on employer image. External communication includes word of mouth that doesn't

necessarily originate within an organization. Therefore, communication evolving around recruitment lies beyond the direct control of the organization and is considered as a non-controllable factor. The above indicates challenges for organizations to control the formation of employer image perceptions in the minds of applicants as there are various of information sources that are not firm-controlled. Perhaps the aim should therefore be in detecting how to minimize the potential damage that this non-controlled information may cause.

Images are influenced by company personnel and external groups through different means of communications (Dowling 1986). The channels of communication include formal and informal channels of communication. Formal channels of communication include media and advertisements and informal channels word-of-mouth from former and current employees. Existing employees have been found to have major influence on how external stakeholders make sense of its employer image (Foster et al. 2011). Quite likely Knox and Freeman (2010) argue that interpersonal communications with current employees are more powerful in shaping employer image perceptions than communication published by the firm itself. Cable and Turban (2001) have identified three dimensions of information that are important for applicants in terms of employer image: employer information, job information and people information. Employer information refers to knowledge provided about general factors of an organization such as company facts and historical attributes. Job information on the other hand refers to information about a certain position including job description, advancement opportunities and salary. And finally, people information refers to information on existing employees of a company.

In addition to communication, theorists have identified organizational culture as an influencing factor of employer image formation. McLeod and Waldman (2011) argue that employer branding should be linked to company's organizational culture to assure that a proper representation of the organization is being delivered. In other words, it could be argued that employer branding must be in line with the organizational culture. Well-developed organizational culture has been found to provide governance for behavior in situations characterized by high uncertainty. Organizational culture commonly has been referred to as the combination of the values and behaviors of members of a firm (Prajogo & Mcdermott 2011). As there is a strong belief that organizations cannot fully control the values and behaviors of its members as they are likely to be influenced by external factors such as personal past experiences, organizational culture has been identified here as uncontrollable factor influencing employer image perceptions.

Thirdly, individual experiences have been found to have influence on employer image formation (Dowling 1986). Even though this was already found by Dowling in 1986, how individual's experience influences employer image formation has received little attention



in past literature. Individuals are likely to experience different interactions with an organization differently. According to these interactions individuals tend to draw different conclusions of an employer. It may therefore be concluded, that the challenge with employer image is that it seems to be a highly complex construct that is constantly evolving and changing as the consequence of a variety of factors. In other words, employer image formation is likely to be an ever-evolving phenomenon. Similarly, Bukowska (2014) argues that the way individuals perceive an organization in the labor market is dynamic in nature and is changing due to factors depending on the employer and factors independent of him. This creates challenges for organizations to implement practices to shape employer image. What creates further challenges to managing employer image is that in past literature there exists a variety of classifications on factors that influence the process of employer image formation (Dowling 1986; Williams & Moffitt 1997; Backhaus & Tikoo 2004). These factors highlight the importance of conducting continuous research on employer image formation.

This study will make an attempt to combine Dowling's (1986) views on image formation to the symbolic-instrumental model of employer image formation presented by Lievens and Highhouse in 2003. The current understanding on employer image formation has been demonstrated in the below figure.

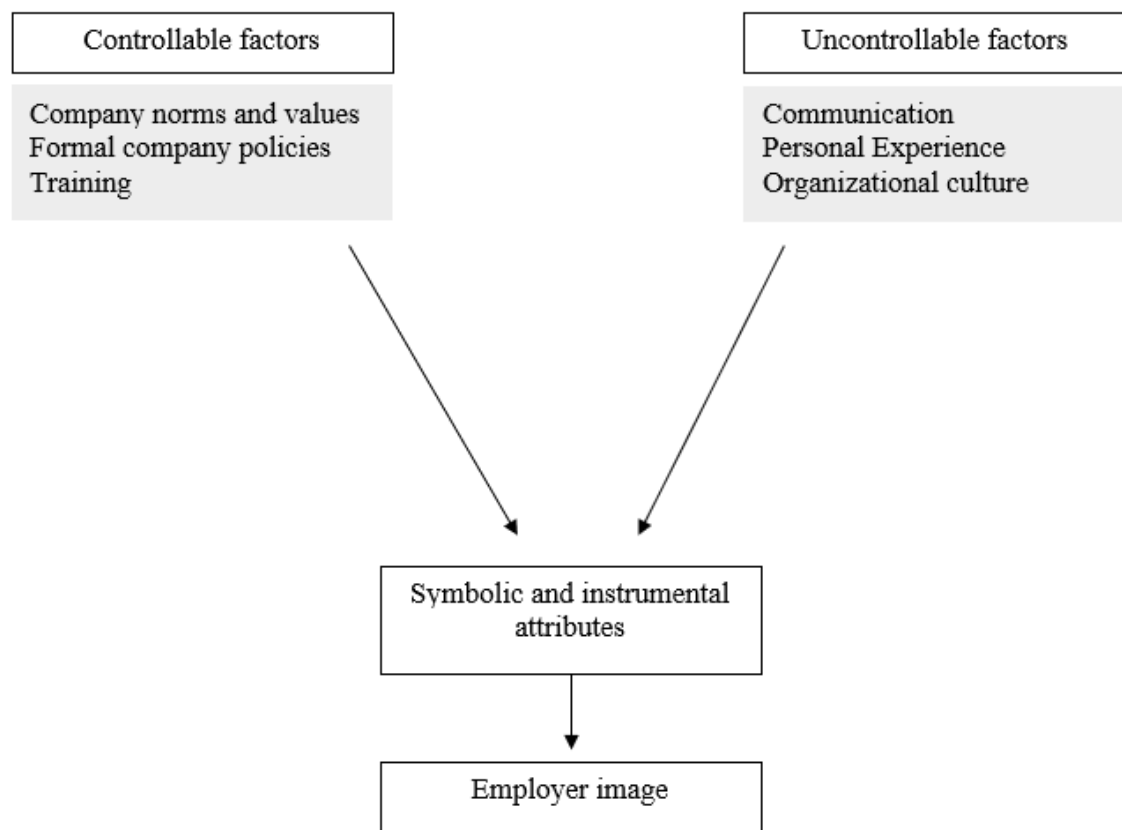


Figure 3 A tentative model for employer image formation

As figure 3 illustrates organizations may through controllable factors promote certain symbolic and instrumental attributes to influence employer image formation. Taken it into a practical level this could suggest that an organization can promote for example symbolic trait of innovativeness on established company norms and values and have an influence on employer image perceptions. In fact, Lievens and Highhouse (2003) found that innovativeness constituted towards how attractive image of a company as an employer was. Likewise, uncontrollable factors contain symbolic and instrumental traits that individuals evaluate. Individuals are likely to pay attention and value attributes differently (Lievens and Highhouse 2003). This may indicate that individuals' experiences create variations on how detected symbolic and instrumental attributes are valued and what kind of employer image is formed.

As mentioned this study is only interested in uncontrollable factors influencing employer image. Furthermore, there has been made a decision to focus on the influence of communication and individual experience on employer image formation. Communication was selected as it has been commonly identified shaping employer image and therefore may not be overlooked. The communication factor consists of both company-originated communication and external interpersonal communication. On the other hand, personal experience of dealings with organization and how these influence employer image has received relatively little attention in the past literature and was therefore taken for closer evaluation. Personal experience on the other hand reflects on how applicant perceives different stages of recruitment. The last uncontrollable factor identified organizational culture and its influence on employer image formation will be briefly discussed but will not be in the center of this study. Finally, in addition to the uncontrollable factors of communication and individual experience the symbolic-instrumental framework will be used to evaluate employer image formation during recruitment. The combination of analyzing communication, personal experience and symbolic-instrumental attributes is believed to be well suited to serve the research objective of gaining knowledge on employer image formation. Additionally, this study is interested in understanding what is the interplay of these factors. That being said this study follows the suggestions of Lievens and Highhouse (2003) and focuses on studying employer image research in the context of recruitment.

### 3 RECRUITMENT

#### 3.1 Defining recruitment

Throughout time recruitment has emerged as the most critical human resource function for organizational success (Breaugh & Stark 2000; Breaugh 2008). Sommer et al. (2017) even argue that recruitment and acquiring collective knowledge is the source of firm's innovativeness and therefore largely determines its capabilities. This is particularly accurate in KIBS industry where companies make business by providing inputs for other organizations' processes based on professional knowledge. The competition in recruitment market is intensifying and organizations have found that traditional recruitment sources may no longer be enough to compete for highly skilled and demanding workforce. Due to this, multiple organizations are experiencing and testing new approaches and methods to recruitment (Taylor & Collins 2000). In order to beat the competition, it is vital that an organization allocates resources into developing more effective recruitment processes.

There exists a 'common sense' understanding on what is recruitment. This study relies on Taylor and Collins' (2000, 305) definition of recruitment:

*“Recruitment includes the set of activities undertaken by the organization for the primary purpose of identifying a desirable group of applicants, attracting them into its employee ranks and retaining them at least for the short term.”*

Similarly, Taylor and Bergmann (1987) argue that typically the term recruitment incorporates wide variety of activities. On the other hand, Orlitzky (2007) refers to recruitment as the practices with the primary purpose of identifying and attracting employees. Past literature has defined recruitment as set of activities, practices, functions and methods (Breaugh 2008; Rashmi 2010). To avoid confusion, in this study the term used to describe individual tasks carried out during recruitment is recruitment activity. However, before moving on to exploring recruitment activities more closely, broader concept of recruitment process will be discussed.

#### 3.2 Process-approach to recruitment

It is commonly recognized in past literature that recruitment is a process that consists of multiple stages or phases (Barber 1998). However, there are different views in terms of

the phases and in terms of when one ends and the next one begins (Taylor & Bergmann 1987; Breaugh 2008; Polsa et al. 2010; Grabara et al. 2016). Barber (1998) proposed that recruitment process phases can be categorized by assessing when individuals move from one category to another. Later on Breaugh with his colleague Strake (2000) recognized the following phases in recruitment process: objective establishment, strategy development, recruitment activity implementation, process variable identification and recruitment result comparison to established objectives. Polsa et al. (2010) on the other hand argues that recruitment process consists of vacancy detection and definition, applicant attraction, candidate assessment and final decision-making. Despite of the differences between these descriptions of recruitment phases there seems to be one common factor: they all acknowledge that each phase consists of smaller characteristics or activities. This study exploits the Model of Organizational Recruitment, illustrated in figure 4, presented by Breaugh and Starke (2000) as it shows the position of recruitment activities in recruitment process and provides the basis to classification of recruitment activities.

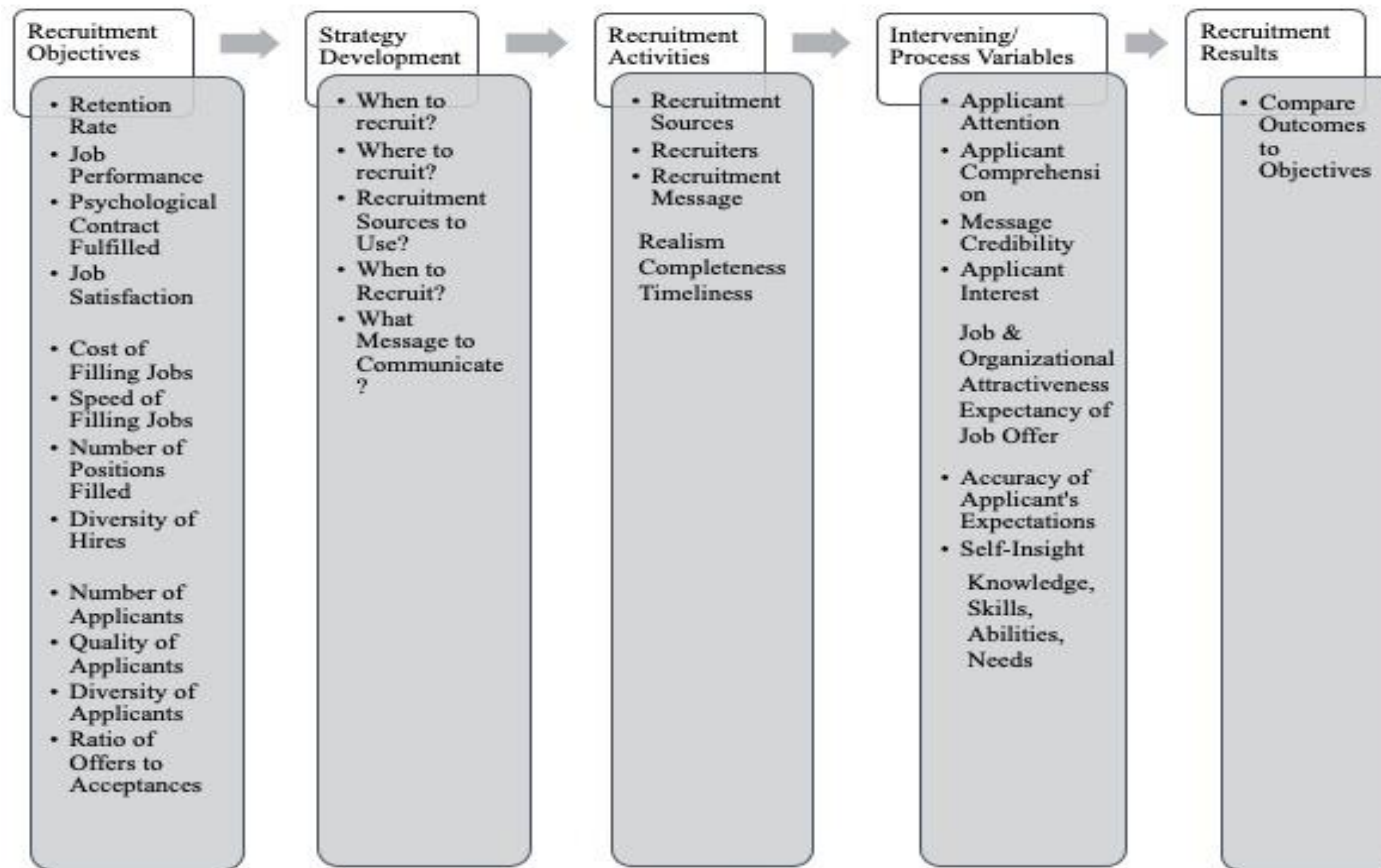


Figure 4 Model of organizational recruitment process (modified from Breaugh & Starke 2000, 408)

Even though Grabara et al. (2016) argue that a significant element of successful recruitment process is planning, Breaugh and Starke (2008) argue that all recruitment processes should start with objective definition. Therefore, they classify acknowledging recruitment objective as the first step of recruitment process as seen in figure 4. Before organization is aware of the type of individual it wishes to attract it is challenging to make the optimal decisions on what techniques to use during recruitment (Breaugh & Starke 2008). After identifying recruitment objectives organizations are capable of planning recruitment strategies. In order to carry out the planned strategy, organizations are now facing a decision to select which recruitment activities will be used to achieve the earlier set objectives. Through out recruitment process there are several variables that are likely to influence recruitment results. Finally, the last stage of recruitment process is to compare recruitment outcomes to objectives. (Breaugh & Starke 2000). By doing this organizations can measure success of the recruitment process.

In spite of how recruitment process phases are classified, recruitment is often highly time-consuming and involves high costs (Grabara et al. 2016). Additionally, there is a high risk that this complex multi-staged process leads to failure. In here failure refers to unfilled vacancy. Therefore, it is vital that organization does recruitment effectively. In fact, it has been found that influence of recruitment process can be far-reaching. Barber (1998) argues that recruitment can influence attitudes and behavior of not only employees and applicants but also of other relevant stakeholders such as customers and investors. Hence, it may have an impact on organizational outcomes. This indicates that recruiters are under pressure to balance between managing the cost involved in recruitment and carrying out a successful recruitment process.

Recruitment process is carried out to find and attract individuals who are capable to fulfill a job vacancy (Taylor & Bergmann 1987). Recruitment process consists of several recruitment activities that organization carry out in order to achieve this objective. This study will focus on understanding the influence of recruitment activities on employer image formation rather than trying to understand what is the role of the whole recruitment process in this. Moreover, this study will only consider recruitment activities that are visible to applicants. This decision is in line with the research aim as, as mentioned, this study takes an applicant perspective to studying recruitment. The following chapters will provide an overview on the classification of recruitment activities and present description on each individual recruitment activity that is central to this study. In this study recruitment activities taken into closer consideration are attraction, selection, decision and employees involved.

### 3.3 Classification of recruitment activities

As fundamental elements of recruitment process, recruitment activities may be seen as a bridge between recruitment objectives and recruitment outcomes. According to Breaugh (2008) the following are recruitment activities: methods used, information conveyed, recruiters used, site visit and extension of job offer. Barber (1998) on the other hand describes recruitment activities as the tasks involved in recruitment that organizations actually do. These include means of locating potential applicants, assisting potential applicants to pursue position in a company and persuading them to ultimately accept the employment offer. By fulfilling these steps Barber (1998) believed that the main objective of recruitment process, vacancy fulfillment, could be achieved.

According to Intindola et al. (2019), recruitment activities are considered to include all points of contact between the applicant and the recruiting organization during the recruitment process. Inspired by Taylor and Bergmann (1987), the recruitment activities that were chosen for closer examination in this study are attraction, selection, and decision period. Additionally, this study also examines recruiters used as later on Breaugh (2008) identified this as a central part of recruitment activities. Incorporating multiple recruitment activities into a research allows studying the interaction between these different activities (Barber 1998). The following paragraphs will elaborate in more detail the nature of each recruitment activity chosen for closer examination.

#### 3.3.1 *Attraction*

One of the earliest decisions recruiters face while starting recruitment is the decision on which attraction method to select and which channel to use to attract potential applicants. Job advertisements have been recognized as one of the most traditional recruitment activities (Barber 1998). In fact, job advertisements have received considerable amount of attention within recruitment research (Breaugh 2008). Job advertisements are only one way of reaching potential applicants and there exist other recruitment activities that may be used to achieve this same goal. These include employee referrals, job fairs, word-of-mouth and employment agencies to mention a few. As a matter of fact, a growing trend in recruitment seems to be the use of more unofficial attraction methods such as networks while attracting candidates (Kauhanen 2012). However, the focus of this study will be on attraction through job advertisement as it was the attraction method used in the recruitment process from which the empirical data of this study was collected.

There are variety of channels that organizations may use to publish job advertisements. As a result of growing dependence on technology, social media and internet are evolving as the main tool used for recruitment (Puncheva-Michelotti et al.

2018). Developing technology has also allowed using numerous types of job advertisements and driven organizations to pay more attention to factors such as recruitment brochures. Organizations are facing many decisions while designing job advertisements in terms of publishing platform, amount of information and type of information included. In addition, organizations must decide about timing and budget of attraction. According to Barber (1998) all these decisions are likely to influence the type and number of applicants reached. This may indicate that the initial decisions made on attraction set the direction for the whole recruitment process. Because of this it is highly important to get these decisions right. As the amount of possible attraction methods is continuously growing organizations need to be more innovative and creative (Kauhanen 2012). It is hence over more important that the effectiveness of different attraction methods during recruitment is constantly evaluated.

### **3.3.2 Selection**

Once organization has successfully attracted candidates the next step is to select the most suitable applicant for the position. These different selection methods assist organizations determining whether an applicant fulfills the qualifications required for a position (Kauhanen 2012). In fact, the aim of selection is to identify the most qualified individual among applicants, by matching organizational needs and applicant abilities (Barber 1998). The following selection methods have been identified as common: interviews, psychological tests, language tests and work simulation (Kauhanen 2012). This study will focus on job interviews as they are the most common selection method (Kauhanen 2012). In addition to interviews, in the particular recruitment process that was the subject of the empirical part of this study, also evaluative tests and interactive recruitment days were used as means of selection. Thus, this study also considers these selection methods and the part that they may play in recruitment process.

Interviews as highly interactive selection method allow two-way communication. Therefore during interviews not only the organization evaluates the applicant's suitability to the position but the applicant also evaluates the employer. The used selection methods may hence not only assist organizations to make decisions but also help job applicants even self-select out of job consideration (Breaugh 2008). This highlights the importance of selection methods, as they become the link between the applicant and information on the organization. Moreover, the criticality of choosing the most suitable selection method is highlighted as particular selection methods have been found to have greater predictability in terms of actual work performance. For example, it may be beneficial to include structured interviews as a part of selection. (Kauhanen 2012)



### **3.3.3 *Decision period***

Once selection is completed recruiters have to evaluate who passes the selection criteria and how the outcome of this evaluation will be announced. This process often becomes more complex, the higher the position that is the target of the recruitment. This is because often in these cases the number of employees involved in the decision gets bigger. During the decision period recruiters compare applicant abilities to identified requirement criteria. Once this process has been completed organizations are facing a situation in which they need to inform externally and internally the outcome of this evaluation process. (Kauhanen 2012). Taylor and Bergmann (1987) on their study of the influence of different recruitment activities on individuals found that the organization's behavior during the decision period had rather significant impact on the applicants and their intentions to remain with the employer. This may therefore indicate that the way organization organizes decision period may have great impact for employee retention. On the other hand, it may also impact future behavior of those applicants that were not hired for the position. For example negative experiences during decision period may impact buying behavior of these individuals as customers. It may therefore be argued that the way organization decides to inform about recruitment decisions may have critical and unpredictable impacts. Organizations are encouraged to plan their actions during decision period carefully.

### **3.3.4 *Employees involved in recruitment***

In addition to attraction, selection and decision period, current employees involved in recruitment process have been identified as a key dimension of recruitment (Barber 1998). This is because in many cases recruiters have an influence on applicant's assessment of compatibility with an organization. Factors such as recruiter's level of experience and credibility have been identified to have an influence on applicant impressions. (Breaugh 2008). Barber (1998) described this influential group of employees that are involved in recruitment process as a group of organizational agents. The group consist of those individuals that actually carry out the recruitment activities. Most commonly, these agents are referred to as recruiters, however in this study broader term of employees involved will be used, as it also includes other employees in addition to trained HR professionals.

The number of employees involved in recruitment is often larger than typically conceived (Barber 1998). Besides recruiters who often operate directly under HR department other employees such as team members of the team that is looking to hire may also be involved in recruitment process. All employees involved are assigned to perform a recruitment process on behalf of the organization's best interests in line with

company policies. In addition to this somewhat controllable group of individuals who are working for an organization, there has been identified a group of outsiders who may also influence the outcomes of recruitment process (Barber 1998). Individuals such as friends and family members are part of this group. This study will focus on the internal organizational agents involved in recruitment. This decision has been made as there are limited research resources. Breugh (2008) identified three reasons why employees involved in recruitment are an important part of a recruitment process: firstly they possess and therefore share different amount of job-related information, secondly their level of credibility is perceived differently in the eyes of applicants and thirdly they signal different things to applicants. That being said, it may be argued that future research is needed to be able to understand the nature of the influence employees involved have in a recruitment process.

As a conclusion on the above this study takes an interest in applicants' personal experience in regards to used attraction and selection methods, decision period and employees involved. This approach is believed to be in line with the earlier presented research objectives as the interest is in applicants' subjective perspectives. What is common with all the above identified recruitment activities is that a consideration of the job variables and the type of individual searched for should play a central role while designing the activities (Breugh 2008). For example, in case an organization wishes to hire a recent graduate for a trainee position, many traditionally considered attraction methods such as newspaper advertisements may not be effective as these individuals rarely read newspapers. In order to detect the most effective recruitment activities for different recruitment needs organizations are encouraged to carry out evaluations of recruitment results by comparing these to the originally set recruitment objectives. This is likely to allow employers to learn from experience and recruit more effectively in the future (Breugh 2008).

However, what brings challenges to learning from past recruitment experiences is that according to Lievens and Slaughter (2016) in recent years the boundaries between what are recruitment activities and what are not have become more blurred. In last decades organizations have started to increasingly seek knowledge on how to incorporate innovative methods to their processes to cope with the stronger competitive pressure (Angelo et al. 2018). As an example, Schroeder and Lile (2016) has identified the expansion of social networking website as a cause for organizations to seek possibilities to exploit alternative recruitment activities. New technologies and inventions are breaking boundaries of current classifications of recruitment activates and therefore continuous research is required on these to provide recruiters greater means to succeed with recruitment. Therefore, organizations need to carefully evaluate whether certain recruitment activities that have been proven successful in the past would actually remain

the most effective today as new technologies and means to recruit are available. The following chapter will aim to provide synthesis on the two research domains introduced: employer image and recruitment and discusses what past literature has found on the interaction between the two.

## **4 EMPLOYER IMAGE FORMATION DURING RECRUITMENT**

### **4.1 The relationship between recruitment and employer image**

By now, it is safe to conclude that organizations are in war when it comes to attracting talent and one effective weapon for this battle is employer image. But what can organizations do to influence the image job seekers will have? When organizations have knowledge on factors that influence employer image formation, they are better able to design interventions to shape it (Lievens & Slaughter 2016). Past literature has identified that there is a relationship between recruitment and employer image (i.e. Lievens & Slaughter 2016). The influence between recruitment and employer image can be two folded. Recruitment can influence employer image and employer image can have an influence on recruitment. This justifies the importance of studying these concepts in conjunction. However, this study takes a focus on only one side of the equation and studies how recruitment influences employer image. Additionally, there already exist many studies that have studied how employer image influences recruitment (e.g. Agrawal & Swaroop 2009; Lemmink et al. 2003).

Recruitment process includes countless interaction points between individual and organization. During these interactions individual receives information of an organization. Based on this information individual draws conclusions of the organization as an employer. In other words, applicants' perceptions of an employer are formed based on experience and knowledge available at different stages of a recruitment process. Lievens and Slaughter (2016) identified multiple recruitment activities that have an influence on employer image formation. However, even though some individual recruitment activities have been found to have an influence on employer image formation our knowledge yet remains hollow on the holistic impact of these activities (Lievens & Slaughter 2016). In addition, it seems that we are still unaware of the principle ways how these activities influence and under what circumstances.

Employer image formation during recruitment is a subjective process and different recruitment activities are likely to have different impact on different applicants. Each applicant comes into a recruitment process with their own subjective views. People in their nature tend to hold on to their established beliefs when confronted with new information (Slaughter et al. 2014) which is why it may be challenging trying to influence employer image during recruitment. Especially if during recruitment organization provides information that is conflicting with the current views of applicant, perceptions are difficult to alter (Slaughter et al. 2014). For applicants who are already highly familiar

with an organization or have strong perceptions of it as an employer it is harder and requires more efforts to have any influence on image perceptions (Collins 2007). Lower-involvement practices are likely to be more advantageous when an organization is rather unknown for the applicant and current perceptions are not strong. On the other hand, high-involvement practices may be favorable in cases where current perceptions are stronger.

Hence it is vital for organizations to understand the current perceptions of their target applicants in order to determine what recruitment investments and actions deliver the greatest value (Cable & Turban 2001). Similarly, Kashive and Kanna (2017) highlight the importance of understanding applicants' views in order to determine which characteristics organization should promote to increase its attractiveness as an employer. Wilden et al. (2010) found that communication that creates mismatches between expectations and reality tends to lead to dissatisfaction. It may be expected that especially with young applicants in KIBS industry image perceptions of an employer may not be very strong as the applicants are about to enter work life for the first time. First time labor market entrants are also likely to lack comprehensive network and therefore their views may have not yet been influenced extensively through word of mouth. However, trying to understand employer image formation during recruitment on individual level is very costly approach. Studying and developing targeted recruitment for applicant groups, such as recent graduates, may be more beneficial while trying to influence construed employer image (Know & Freeman 2006). This may indicate that there is a possibility to detect recruitment activities that are likely to enhance young job seekers' perceptions of an employer.

As a conclusion, it may be argued that recruitment influences employer image and past literature has even identified individual recruitment activities that play a role. However further knowledge is required on ways specific recruitment activities contribute to the formation of employer image and what is the interplay between these. As mentioned this study will focus on three factors that have been found to have a role in employer image formation: communication, personal experience and instrumental as well as symbolic attributes. What this implies while taking recruitment as a context into account is that the focus will be on studying what is the role of *applicants' personal experiences on used recruitment activities* (attraction and selection methods, decision period and employees involved) and the role of *external and internal recruitment communication* in employer image formation. In addition the role of *instrumental and symbolic factors* in employer image formation will be studied.

## **4.2 The influence of personal experience on used recruitment activities**

Applicants' personal experience on used recruitment activities have been found to affect applicants' perceptions in both negative and positive directions (Taylor & Bergmann). Starting with the first activity of recruitment process, attraction, it can be argued that the way organization attracts applicants influences applicants' employer images (Walker et al. 2008; Lievens & Slaughter 2016). In fact lot of attention in the past recruitment research has been given to studying the influence on employer image in the early stages of recruitment process. Interventions during initial steps of recruitment are likely to have greater effect on how organization will be perceived (Collins & Stevens 2002). This is because at this point applicant is likely to have little information of the employer. The information that an organization gives during the initial steps of recruitment process accumulates job seeker's knowledge and hence shapes his image of the organization (Lyons & Marler 2011). What makes the information outcome of an organization during the initial steps of recruitment process even more critical is that often job seeker's organizational image in the beginning is based on something that has been referred to as "general impressions" (Gatewood et al. 1993).

It has been found that recruitment advertisements can influence employer image (Gatewood et al. 1993; Nolan et al. 2013). For example aesthetically appealing advertisements are likely to have positive influence on employer image. There are growing amount of new publicity and advertising techniques, such as developed aesthetics, that organizations can use in the early stages of recruitment process to create positive image. However, what brings challenges to studying the influence of job advertisements on employer image is that what may be appealing for certain individuals may not be so for others. For example, Walker et al. (2008) found that applicants with different levels of experience may be influenced by different advertisement characteristics. Less experienced applicants are often looking for personal fit to organization (Walker et al. 2008). Therefore having employee comments on videos posted on recruitment websites can have stronger influence on employer image perceptions for these individuals.

Past literature has also been able to identify general characteristics that play a role in employer image formation regardless of applicant characteristics. For example the level of specificity in advertisement messages is likely to influence on employer image formation (Roberson et al. 2005; Walker et al. 2008). When it comes to attraction channels, as the popularity of using electronic attraction methods is increasing it is also important to evaluate the influence of website design on employer image. Walker et al. (2011) argue that website characteristics influence the development of image perceptions.

Past literature has identified job and organizational content as well as aesthetics as three major influential characteristics. The influence of these on employer image strengthens as organizational websites are emerging as the primary channel for finding information of potential employer (Lievens & Slaughter 2016). According to Baum and Kabst (2010) the attractiveness of website can positively influence the image of the employer. However more research is required on how applicants perceive recruitment websites and how this influence their employer image.

Moving on to selection methods as a determinant of employer image. As selection methods are often the most interactive recruitment activity their influence on employer image can be significant. Selection provides opportunities for applicants to make observations on an organization and then build employer image based on these. Honkala et al. (2014) have identified that during interview situation factors such as recruiter behavior and interview questions influence the organization's employer image. Additionally, other factors including other employees met and company premises visited act as information sources to applicants. Interview situation is therefore also an opportunity for the applicant to get a holistic picture of the organization, its goals and values. What seems to be yet unclear in past literature is related to the knowledge on what specific interview methods may contribute to beneficial employer image. There is still room for future research in this aspect.

Additionally, it has been found that the way organizations inform applicants on the final decision of recruitment can influence employer image perceptions (Kauhanen 2012, 88). For example there may be different influence on applicants' employer image depending on whether organization informs all applicants on the decision, including those not selected, and thanks them for their interest towards the organization. This may be critical as it remains as the last contact with an organization. Additionally, Lievens and Slaughter (2016) identified that reducing delay between candidate interviews and decision publication can influence employer image. Similar conclusions were made by Beckett et al. (2010) as they argued that making faster offers improve images held by recruits and make them more likely to accept offers. The above findings provide evidence to the argument that in fact all interaction points, between individual and organization, from attraction through selection until decision, can contribute to formation of employer image. In addition to these what is also likely to influence applicant's personal experience on recruitment and that way their employer image perceptions are employees involved in the recruitment. In fact Foster et al. (2010) argue that employer image is established through the actions of front-line employees rather than the established controlled recruitment activities.

Especially in service industries such as KIBS, current employees play a critical role in the development of images and the same applies in with employer image development in recruitment market (Knox & Freeman 2006). Foster et al. (2010) also recognizes the

importance of internal stakeholders, the existing employees, and their central position in employer image formation. Recruiters can have substantial influence on applicants' perceptions and behaviors in multiple ways. Particularly recruiters' behaviors are an important determinant whereas recruiter demographics are not really related to employer image formation. (Lievens & Slaughter 2016). Rynes et al. (1980) found that factors such as recruiter knowledge, attempt to attract, personality, personal characteristics and overall behavior are influencing applicant perceptions. For example applicants tend to react favorably to friendly recruiters who provide a lot of information and in comparison react negatively to recruiters who behave in a somehow unprofessional manner or take a long time to communicate interview feedback.

Rynes et al. (1980) found that in fact not only recruiters but all organizational representatives can have an effect on applicants' perceptions. As employees involved in the recruitment process can have a major impact on applicants' image perceptions, they may also bring challenges to trying to influence employer image formation. The challenge therefore may be to get organizational promise understood correctly among all employees and get them committed to deliver it. This indicates that there is a relationship between internal employer image and external employer image. Internal guidance and training may be used to control the influence that employees involved have on the way applicants experience recruitment. Even though it has been detected that employees have a critical role in the recruitment process in terms of perceptions of potential recruits on the firm there is little research on this area (Knox & Freeman 2006). There still remain gaps in our knowledge on how employees involved in recruitment influence image perceptions of applicants for example in terms of what is the conjunction of recruiters and other recruitment activities. Therefore, further empirical evidence is required in order to gain holistic understanding on how organizational employees involved in the recruitment process influence employer image formation.

As a conclusion on the above, past research has been able to identify certain recruitment activities that are likely to have rather high influence on employer image formation. These activities include specific attraction methods, in particular job advertisements and website characteristics, selection methods, especially interviews, and behavior during decision period. In addition, recruiter behavior is likely to influence the formation of employer image for job applicants. Besides these identified recruitment activities, external and internal communication play a determinant role in shaping applicants' employer image perceptions and therefore will be examined in more detail in the following chapter.



### 4.3 Communication as a determinant of employer image

Gatewood et al. (1993) found that images of an organization are closely related to the information available about it. During recruitment organizations communicate various kind of messages according to which public creates perceptions of the organization. Kashive and Kanna (2017) state that organizations' efforts to attract new employees are in many ways similar to organization's efforts to market its products or services. Both potential customers and applicants develop their image perceptions about an organization based on the organizations' messages communicated. Based on these messages where as potential customers form beliefs on whether to purchase a product, potential applicants form beliefs on to what extent to pursue employment possibilities within an organization.

Cable and Turban (2001) refer to the information given during the recruitment process as an anchor for evaluating the organization. The mere exposure to information of an individual is a great determinant of the resultant image (Taylor & Collins 2000). The amount of information applicant receives influences employer image formation (Gatewood et al. 1993; Lyons & Marler 2011). Lack of communication may lead to loose or even negative perceptions of the employer. In fact, the influence of poor recruitment communication may be widespread. Barber (1998) refers to this as a significant "public relations" aspect to recruitment. During recruitment organizations put forward variety of information to the applicants. This information can then be spread through public channels or through word of mouth to outsiders. These findings indicate that employer image perceptions are in fact influenced extensively through different communications during recruitment.

Cable and Turban (2001) determined three boarder communicational categories in recruitment context that corresponds to the applicants' perceptions about employer. Firstly, during recruitment, organizations deliver *employer information* which includes more general information on the company including size, centralization and geographical dispersion. Also factors such as corporate social and environmental responsibility policies, organizational values and organizational culture may have an influence on job applicant perceptions (Catanzaro 2010; Chaudhary 2019). In addition to employer information, Cable and Turban (2001) identified *job information* as a second important category influencing employer image perceptions. This indicates that applicants create perceptions of an organization as an employer also based on characteristics communicated during recruitment about the exact position. Majority of this information is often included in the job advertisement including the type of work performed, the title and description. Also job related information about career advancements and opportunities have been found to influence applicant perceptions (Backhaus & Tikoo 2004). The third communicational category Cable and Turban (2001) identified is *people information*. Current employees send powerful signals during recruitment to applicants,

especially on what it would be like to work in an organization, and therefore give indications on how well the applicant would fit in. This is particularly important, as people are likely to be interested in the attributes of potential future co-workers, as they wish to feel sense of similarity (Cable and Turban 2001).

Furthermore employer image formation can be influenced by recruitment communication published by the firm itself as well as by other outside sources of information (Cable & Turban 2001). Social influence has been identified as an important determinant in job-search research and it is generally recognized that applicants' attitudes towards an organization as an employer are influenced by what other people such as family and friends think and feel about the organization or the job (Van Hove & Saks 2011). In fact, recruitment research has suggested that word-of-mouth communication can have strong effects on employer image (Collins & Stevens 2002). This may be especially applicable among young professionals as they are likely to largely rely on peer-to-peer discussions.

In relation to recruitment communication channels, Allen et al. (2004) found that face-to-face communication and other communication channels that allow more personal focus and social presence have a strong influence on image perceptions. Especially among younger applicants, social media presence has been found to be connected to applicant perceptions (Sivertzen et al. 2013). However more research is required on how applicants examine and interpret information from different sources to determine how these influence the employer images. In addition to communication channels, the nature of recruitment messages is likely to influence formed employer images. Verbal, non-verbal, internal and external messages, in other words all communication occurring during recruitment process, include countless of clues according to which applicants evaluate the organization and therefore can influence formed employer images. One framework for determining and evaluating the impact of these different clues is to use the symbolic-instrumental framework that has been used to study the formation of employer image. The role of this framework in the formation of employer image during recruitment will be further elaborated in the next chapter.

#### **4.4 Implementing the symbolic-instrumental framework**

According to the symbolic-instrumental framework employer image develops according to symbolic and instrumental attributes (Van Hove & Saks 2011). In other words, employer image is made of specific attributes that an applicant associates with an organization as a place of work. In each point of recruitment, the organization sends symbolic and instrumental signals to applicants. As a recap, symbolic attributes refer to

subjective and intangible attributes and have been referred to as organizational personality trait inferences (i.e. innovativeness, internationality, reputation and diversity), whereas instrumental attributes relate to tangible attributes that deliver utilitarian value (i.e. pay, location, dress code, benefits and contractual factors). (Lievens & Slaughter 2016.) Although there can be found lot of prior research that has applied the instrumental-symbolic framework for studying how organization's images are perceived, little attention has been given on what is the role of recruitment in this.

During the recruitment process applicants draw conclusions on a variety of symbolic and instrumental attributes. For example, applicants have possibilities to make interpretations on symbolic attributes such as organizational culture based on recruitment communication. In addition, for example during interviews applicants can evaluate signs of organizational culture through recruiter behavior. Similar interpretations may be more difficult to make from general public announcements. Hence, during recruitment applicants have unique access to different signals of unknown organizational characteristics (Knox & Freeman 2006).

As mentioned earlier, in the war for talent differentiation is one way for organizations to stand out. Often within an industry, rivaling companies are likely to offer similar instrumental attributes and therefore it may be difficult to compete with instrumental attributes. Especially with lower level positions in KIBS industry, instrumental attributes such as salary do not majorly differ. This may indicate that symbolic attributes could have greater influence on organization's employer image. Symbolic attributes have been argued to be of a high importance because people are attracted to these characteristics to express their values and impress others (Highhouse et al. 2009). According to Van Hoya and Saks (2011), an example of symbolic attribute that has been found to have influence on applicant perceptions and level of attraction is educational opportunities. Lievens and Highhouse (2003) found on their study on banking industry that applicants found it easier to differentiate among organizations based on symbolic attributes rather than more traditional job and organizational instruments. In particular, the level of innovativeness and competence received high emphasis. However, more research is needed to confirm the applicability of these findings in other industries.

Lievens and Highhouse (2003) explain the high level of attention applicants often put on exploring symbolic attributes through social identity theory. According to this theory the organization in which an individual works is great determinant of one's social identity. In fact, it has been found that specific organizational symbolic traits are found more attractive depending on the applicant's own personality traits (Slaughter et al. 2004). Individuals are drawn to organizations with traits that are similar to their personal ones and use organizational images to gauge how others are judging themselves (Lievens & Highhouse 2003). For instance, in case an organization during recruitment strongly promotes independent working atmosphere, individuals who value this highly may be

more likely to be drawn to the employer. Applicants are attracted towards traits through which they may improve their self-image and/or express themselves (Van Hove & Saks 2011). This may explain why Ito et al. (2013) arrived to a conclusion that image may need to be relatively broad to accommodate diversity.

During initial steps of recruitment, especially in the attraction phase as it is likely that applicants are involved in consideration of higher number of different jobs and organizations, symbolic attributes are more likely to provide opportunities for differentiation (Lievens & Highhouse 2003). However, the importance of including basic instrumental attributes for example in job advertisement cannot be overlooked as these attributes primarily trigger the interest of applicants because of their utility (Lievens & Highhouse 2003). Most applicants while looking for a job tend to seek possibilities that offer maximized benefits and minimized costs. As a conclusion on the above views, employer image formation is also influenced by symbolic and instrumental attributes. In order to gain deeper understanding on this, more research is required in terms of how applicants interpret and put value on different attributes. This study will therefore shift focus on studying in more detail young professionals' perceptions on which attributes they emphasize and how this is related to their views of an organization as an employer.

From the above attempt of merging employer image and recruitment literatures it is safe to argue that recruitment does have an influence on employer image. Much of past literature has been focusing on the role of early recruitment activities in this equation (Collins & Stevens 2002; Walker et al. 2008; Agrawal & Swaroop 2011; Elving et al. 2013; Kashive & Khanna 2017) and therefore further studies are required as to what is the role of other activities. Therefore, it is important to also include activities occurring at later stages to the study. Employer image formation during recruitment occurs throughout the whole process through countless of controllable and uncontrollable factors. During recruitment employer image is consciously built but also builds on applicants' unconscious perceptions. Therefore, the underlying reasons why certain ideas of an organization as an employer came to exist may be difficult to detect. Despite these challenges, many activities that play part in the image formation process have been identified.

Employer image during recruitment forms through interaction points between the applicant and organization (Lievens & Slaughter 2016). This study groups these interaction points to the following recruitment activities: attraction, selection, decision and employees involved. Past literature has acknowledged that all these factors influence the formation of employer image (Gatewood et al. 1993; Foster et al. 2010; Kauhanen 2012; Honkala et al. 2014). In addition to individual recruitment activities of attraction, selection, decision and employees involved, recruitment communication has been found to be major determinant in development of employer image (Cable & Turban 2001). This

may likely be as communication is a central part of each individual recruitment activity. Finally, taking a step further, during recruitment, applicants receive countless signs of symbolic and instrumental attributes according to which employer image perceptions develop. Figure 8 illustrates the interaction of these elements and concludes the current understanding of employer image formation during recruitment.

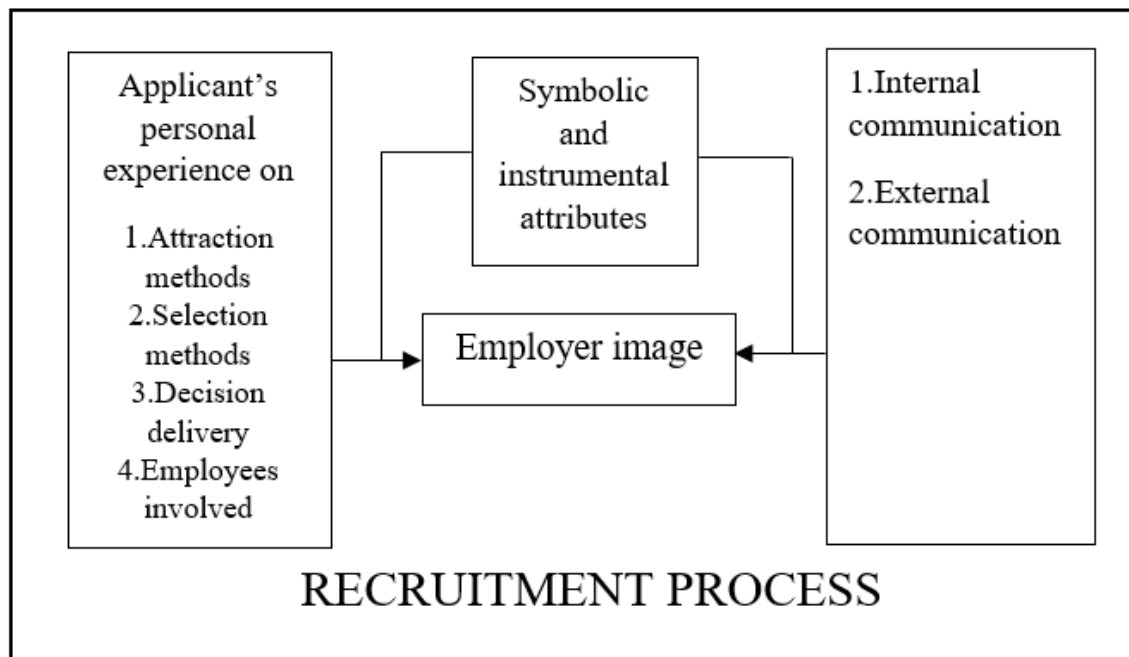


Figure 5 Employer image formation during recruitment

As figure 8 demonstrates, past literature has identified that communication, applicant's personal experience and symbolic and instrumental attributes all influence employer image formation during recruitment and there exists a common understanding on how employer image is formed during recruitment. However, more knowledge is required in terms of what is the role of these individual factors in employer image formation and what is the holistic impact of these. That being said, this study moves on to the empirical part of the study and through qualitative research aims to detect further evidence on what is the role of communication, personal experience on used recruitment activities and symbolic as well as instrumental attributes in employer image formation.

More precisely, the empirical part of this study aims to gain deeper understanding of the role of communication, as the empirical data collection tries to find out how applicants interpret recruitment messages send by the organization and outsiders. In addition, the aim is to clarify what is the role of applicant's personal experience on recruitment in employer image formation. The interest is in understanding how the way applicants experience certain recruitment activities influence their perceptions of the organization as an employer. Finally, in order to find answers to the above dilemmas on communication and recruitment activities it needs to be understood what are the constructors of employer

image. Therefore, the formation of employer image will be studied by utilizing the symbolic-instrumental framework. Given that previous research has identified symbolic and instrumental attributes as determinants of employer image (i.e. Van Hove & Saks 2011) the present study takes a step further and investigates specific attributes within these two groups that young applicants acknowledge and put of a high value. Previous research in symbolic and instrumental framework has identified that different groups of individuals differ in their ratings of these attributes, but these studies have concentrated on groups such as applicants versus employees (Van Hove & Saks 2011). Deep understanding on how employer image develops during recruitment and what is the role of the above identified factors in this process may also provide further information to organization in terms of how to arrange recruitment. This may be beneficial as it seems that past literature is yet rather hollow in terms of practical implications. Additionally further information on how organizations should arrange recruitment is especially important for KIBS sector as there exists close connection between organizational success and the quality of acquired talent (Behrends 2007).

## 5 RESEARCH DESIGN

### 5.1 Research approach

According to Eriksson and Kovalainen (2015) the selection of research design is as important as selecting a research topic as it contains the planning of the whole research project. Even though qualitative, quantitative and mixed methods research approaches are each advantageous for study purposes, the selection of the most suitable method to match the research subject is critical. After evaluation on these, qualitative research approach was found most suitable for the given research topic and aim. For this decision numerous of reasons may be identified. Firstly, according to Patton (2014, 6) essential for qualitative research is illustrating how humans make sense of the world. As mentioned the main purpose of this study is to identify factors that influence employer image and gain understanding on the role these factors play in employer image formation. This will be done by capturing the perspectives of prospective employees. As the aim is to understand applicant's perceptions and how they feel certain events influence their opinions the essence of qualitative research was found the most appropriate for this study. Furthermore, as the objective of this study is to examine employer image formation, precisely in the eyes of applicants, qualitative research approach enables this by allowing to reveal individual's personal understanding of a phenomena. (Patton 2014, 18).

Secondly, Patton (2014, 8) identifies "capturing and understanding diverse perspectives, observing and analyzing behaviors in context, looking for patterns in what human beings do and think – and examining the implications of those patterns" as basic contributions of qualitative research. This elaborates the ability of qualitative research to explore in depth and structure convoluted subjects such as the complexity of human nature, human relations as well as human interactions and perceptions, some of which are fundamental constructs in this study. In other words, it is believed that by taking a qualitative approach the complexity of this study's research topic may be uncovered.

Thirdly, due to the study's highly people-focused subject and the nature of the fundamental research question, which is highly connected to the social aspect of the business world, qualitative research approach was found most suitable. This report lies on an assumption that reality is socially constructed, which in fact is a central assumption in qualitative research (Gioia et al. 2013), as the main topic of the research is the procedures in human resources. The stated problem in this study is explored most comprehensively through non-quantifiable outcomes rather than through numerical measures. Fourthly, the selection of qualitative approach for the subject was found suitable also due to the nature of qualitative research being less structured and allowing somewhat less concrete and highly interpretative outcomes (Southern 2016). Additionally, in this

study the access to limited research resources also supports the selection of qualitative approach as it typically produces rich information with a smaller number of informants (Patton, 2014, 22).

Fifthly, Eriksson and Kovalainen (2015) argue that research method should be chosen in correspondence with the research questions. In qualitative studies, where the goal usually is to describe and understand a certain phenomenon, research questions in general are designed as “what” and “how” type of questions (Saaranen-Kauppinen & Puusniekka 2009). In this study the set research question and sub-question are this type of questions. Additionally, according to Creswell et al. (2007), typical for research questions in qualitative approach is that they are often open-ended questions. Therefore, the decision to choose qualitative approach in this study may also be justified with its suitability with the set research questions.

Finally, qualitative research approach was selected as it rarely follows a tightly woven plan but rather allows room for deviations and enables researcher to flow freely between the different phases during the research process. Therefore, it often develops into a circuitous process (Eskola & Suoranta 2005). In this study, it allowed the researcher to go back to the setting of the research problem and adjust it as the data collection proceeded. Qualitative research has been often defined through comparison to quantitative research and many of the known definitions are based on matters and characteristics that quantitative research does not have. One of these characteristics is the particularly this ability of a qualitative study to adapt and develop throughout the whole research process.

However, Eriksson and Kovalainen (2015) argue that even though often a strict plan will not be followed in qualitative research, it is beneficial to recognize some key elements that will be planned beforehand. Therefore, a general research design was created in advance. Nevertheless, it should be emphasized that the possibility for changes was allowed, as Maxwell (2012, 2) argues that in qualitative research any component of the design may need to be modified in case of shifts in another component. The remainder of the methodology chapter will focus on describing the key elements planned and executed justifying further decisions made in regards to research methods.

## **5.2 Data collection**

Qualitative approach can be seen as an umbrella under which there are an array of research methods, all distinctive in nature (Creswell et al. 2007; Tuomi & Sarajärvi 2017). In this study interview was found as the most appropriate research method as the goal is to understand, from applicant perspective, how recruitment process influences employer



image formation. This corresponds with the goal of qualitative research interview, which is to see the research topic in the perspective of the interviewee and to understand how and why the informants came to have this particular perspective (King 1994; Cassell & Symon 2004). Using interviews as a research method will also allow the exploration of the subjective views of the participants (Puusa 2011), which particularly is of high interest in this study. Furthermore, Williams and Moffitt (1997) in their study of image impression process demonstrated that it is in fact possible to gain insights on an image creation process through personal interviews. Inspired by this, interviews were found the most suitable research method for this study, as they allow understanding of people's perspectives and interpretations. That way it may be expected that knowledge on not only what happened but also why it happened may be obtained. Interviews are also the most widely used qualitative research methods in organizational research, likely due to the flexibility the method can offer and its capability of producing data of great depth (King 1994).

The next decision the researcher must make is related to the type of research interview, as there exist several types that vary in their use, focus, degree of structure and objectives (King 1994). Puusa (2011) identifies structured, semi-structured, theme, open, and in-depth interviews as some of the most common types of research interviews. The desired level of structure guided the preliminary selection of the type of interview used. After initial exploration, semi-structured interviews were found best suited to serve the aim of this study. Semi-structured interviews as a research method allow the researcher to set certain premises beforehand, and guide the interview without controlling it fully. This allows unexpected answers to emerge, as there are no readily set answer options (Eskola & Suoranta 2005). That way the selection of semi-structured interview type also fits the explorative nature of this study as it assists with assuring that no critical perspectives will be overlooked. It was considered that structured interviews would not be appropriate as they allow only little or no variation. As the aim of this study is to gain deep understanding of the studied phenomena it is believed that an interview type that also leaves room for free flow of conversation was required. However, on the other hand, fully unstructured open interviews would be very time consuming and difficult to analyze due to a lack of predetermined interview questions. It is also believed that the use of semi-structured interviews will be beneficial in the analysis phase, as there exists a level of structure upon which the analysis may be built.

In correspondence with Eriksson and Kovalainen's (2015) suggestions, an outline of topics was prepared while making the interview guide, presented in appendix 1, for the semi-structured interviews. However, before this, the operationalization of the research question was done to assure that the empirical study was conducted in accordance to the relevant theoretical background. The operationalization of the research question was formed as follows:

Table 2      Operationalization of research question

Research Question	Sub-questions	Theoretical Background	Theme Areas
How employer image develops during recruitment?	What is the role of communication in shaping employer image during recruitment?	External & Internal communication	Message content and delivery, Message source, Communication channel
	How does the applicant's personal experience on used recruitment activities influence employer image formation?	The formation of employer image	Applicant attraction, Selection of candidates, Decision delivery, Employees involved
	What is the role of instrumental and symbolic attributes in building employer image during recruitment?	Instrumental-Symbolic framework	Organizational factors, Employment factors, Organizational culture, Organizational recognition, Work community

The operationalization table summarizes the central constructs of this study. The interview outline was developed based on these constructs. Moreover the guide was built around two concepts: communication and personal experience on used recruitment activities. The relation of instrumental and symbolic attributes was studied by detecting the frequency of attributes that interviewees brought up throughout interviews and by evaluating the value they place on them. The topics therefore included in the interview guide were placed in three sections: 'background', 'communication' and 'experience on used recruitment activities'. Careful designing of the interviews is believed to compensate the lack of knowledge or training on interview techniques of the researcher, which has been identified as one of the most common challenges while using interviews as research method (Eriksson & Kovalainen 2015). With this, the aim is to avoid ineffective interview techniques such as using yes/no or leading questions and keeping personal opinions in

check. The planning of interviewing techniques is motivated by learning the respondents' true feelings, opinions and experiences.

The set interview outline however, allowed the interview guide to develop based on the initial responses. Therefore, throughout data collection there remained the possibility of varying the wording and order of questions in each interview. This assisted with maintaining the tone of the interview rather informal and conversational to capture true and subjective experiences and opinions of respondents. In fact, in qualitative interviews developing the interview guide does not often stop in the first interview, but rather the guide may be adjusted throughout its use (King 1994). This study exploited this advantage of qualitative interviews as the interview guide was modified based on the first interviews. According to the initial responses, questions were refined and additional questions regarding arisen unexpected perspectives were added.

One common challenge identified while developing individual interview questions is not to get them mixed with the set research questions. Researcher should devote time to developing interview questions that are related, but not equal to the research questions. The interview guide mostly consisted of open-ended questions as they allow more control to the participant and therefore produce more detailed responses (Eriksson & Kovalainen 2015). The individual questions were created in such a way that it would leave room for detecting differences on knowledge and feelings through the course of recruitment process. The style of the questions was kept neutral to avoid presumptions and pre-given typologies intervening. Questions were developed in accordance to Tuomi and Sarajärvi's (2017) recommendation that each question should be connected to the study's theoretical framework, the information already known on the studied phenomenon.

In relation to recruiting participants to this study, King's (1994) suggestions were followed and confidentiality was assured to participants. In addition, it was clearly stated who was conducting the study and for what purposes. This study collected the empirical data from the recruitment program of global consulting company operating in knowledge-intensive services. More precisely, the data was collected from applicants who attended the organizations' recruitment process for the following spring trainee program, allowing the informants to provide comments on the topics at hand. After the recruitment process, a cover letter, presented in appendix 2, was given to the applicants. The cover letter informed the applicants on the purpose of this study and emphasized that participation in the study is completely voluntarily and detached from the recruitment and would not influence the recruitment decisions in anyway. Applicants were given the opportunity to voluntarily take contact and participate in the study and therefore, the final selection decision was in the hands of the participants of the trainee recruitment process. All together 8 interviews were held. The ability of qualitative interviews to provide a great deal of information (Weiss 1995) allowed relying on a smaller sample which, taking into

consideration the limited research resources in this study, was considered as highly beneficial.

The informants were a mix of soon to graduate or recently graduated university students that represented the population of interest, young professionals. All informants had applied to positions that fully or partly corresponded with their educational background. All the interview participants had applied to the target organization's trainee program in fall 2019. Each informant was interviewed individually. It is believed that with individual interviews the challenges with participants not being comfortable with sharing their true and honest opinions in more open, for example group settings, can be overcome. In accordance to each informants' consent, all interviews were recorded. Audio recording was used as it is impossible for an interview to process smoothly if the researcher continually stops to write down what was said (King 1994). Detailed data on each individual interview, durations, dates and settings can be found in the below table.

Table 3 The interviews

Informant	Date	Duration of the interview	Type of the interview	Recruitment outcome
I1	11.11.2019	1.28.32	Skype	Accepted
I2	11.11.2019	30.36	Telephone	Not accepted
I3	20.11.2019	29.56	Face-to-Face	Accepted
I4	25.11.2019	46.04	Face-to-Face	Accepted
I5	27.11.2019	48.40	Face-to-Face	Accepted
I6	28.11.2019	35.39	Telephone	Not accepted
I7	29.11.2019	28.17	Face-to-Face	Accepted
I8	18.12.2019	50.51	Face-to-Face	Accepted

As seen from table 3, applicants were interviewed relatively quickly after the informants were informed about the final decision and the recruitment process had ended face-to-face, through skype or over telephone. The respondent group consisted of applicants who were accepted and applicants who were not accepted to the job, to reduce the possibility of biased or unilateral findings. All respondents participated in the research anonymously. Participants were assured that their responses would only be seen by the researcher and after analysis their responses would be destroyed. This is believed to increase trust between the interviewer and informants, which is highly important because sensitivity has been identified as a challenge with using interviews as research method (Eskola & Suoranta 2005). Additionally the researcher and informants share a peer-to-peer relationship and similar backgrounds have been argued to prevent socially determined factors of bringing challenges to the communication process (Eskola & Suoranta 2005).

In addition to the applicants, recruiters also provided information for the study. The recruiters involved in the trainee program recruitment were briefly interviewed to get an overview on the recruitment activities used in the process. All interviews were held in Finnish as it was the native language of both the interviewer and interviewees, and therefore is believed to assist in keeping the nature of the interviews more natural and conversational. However, during data transcription the responses were translated into English for the purpose of presenting them in the findings section of this study. This may make the findings vulnerable for researcher subjectivity or presence of misinterpretations. However, the possibility for result distortion due to translation is believed to be low due to researcher's knowledge of both languages. Once data collection had been completed all interviews were transcribed for data analysis. The finalized transcripts totaled 59 pages.

### **5.3 Data analysis**

Once data collection has been conducted the researcher moves on to organizing, analyzing and interpreting qualitative data. In this study data analysis was done by using thematic analysis. Data analysis is needed as observations as such are not considered findings but rather a mass of fragmented material and through analysis researcher gives meaning to raw data and produces additional data (Järvenpää 2006). The massive amount of data in fact often develops as a challenge in making sense of qualitative data (King 1994). However, data analysis allows the identification, analysis and reporting of themes within this data and therefore, enables narrowing the focus and drawing conclusions. Before moving into the analysis in more detail, the researcher should consider from which perspective the data collected will be evaluated (Puusa 2011). As this study is interested in the subjective views and experiences of young job applicants, it is believed that the responses they have given during the interviews are honest. This study has taken a factual perspective to the material collected as this perspective is often selected when the aim of the analysis is to clarify how interviewees experience or interpret certain matters (Puusa 2011).

Additionally King (1994) identified that before the analysis phase, the researcher should start with thorough familiarization with the data. Because of this the data analysis began with reviewing the transcripts. This also allowed potential mistakes made during transcription to be corrected. During the familiarization preliminary themes for the analysis already started to emerge. The individual themes for thematic research can be discovered already in advance for data collection or new themes may be produced based on the data collected. Either way the themes must be eventually chosen, whether beforehand or afterwards, in line with the research problem (Puusa 2011). In this study

three themes were identified already for data collection based on the literature review: communication, personal experience on used recruitment activities and symbolic and instrumental attributes. In addition to these the explorative nature of thematic analysis allowed also identification of sub-themes by classifying, dividing and categorizing the data collected. These were identified by distinguishing aspects that are common for multiple interviewees and thereafter detect resemblance.

Thematic network analysis tool introduced by Attride-Stirling (2001) was used for organizing the data analysis. This tool allows displaying themes as well as their relationships and therefore facilitates the interpretation of the interview data. It does this by providing means to break up a text by identifying different levels of themes: basic, organizing and global themes. The identification of these different level themes follows a bottom-up logic by first identifying basic simple characteristic of collected data (basic themes), that then cluster into bigger significations that summarize similar issues (organizing themes) which then finally encompasses or concludes metaphors in the data together into a one whole claim (global theme) (Attride-Stirling 2001). By doing this, the thematic network tool assists the researcher during analysis to find deeper meanings, explore new emerged themes and identify patterns behind them (Nowell et al. 2017). The tool laying out these different classes of themes is presented in appendix 3. The below figure, presents the adaptation of this tool in this study.

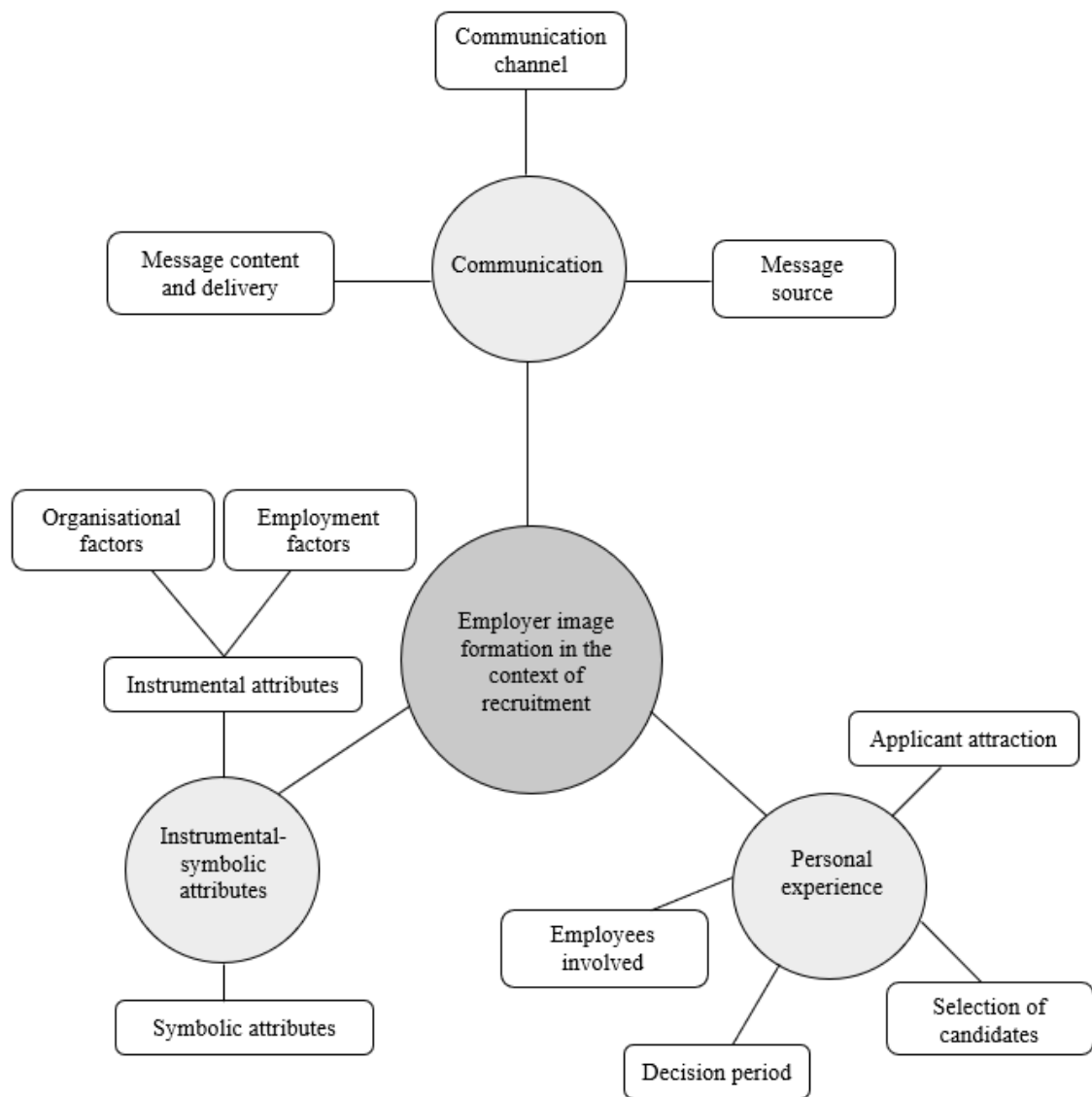


Figure 6 Thematic network analysis (Inspired by Attride-Stirling 2001)

Together with the thematic network tool, presented in figure 6, the earlier presented operationalization table was used to assist with assuring there remained a link between theory and findings throughout the analysis process. This is also believed to assist the researcher to focus on the relevant data (Eskola & Suoranta 2005). The thematic network displays a combination of the theoretical framework of this study as well as the empirical findings. The network assisted with capturing holistic picture of the studied phenomena and gaining throughout understanding of it.

## 5.4 Trustworthiness of the study

Trustworthiness of a research is a central question in terms of reporting the study as it largely determines the level of utilization of the findings (Sarajärvi & Tuomi 2017). In

addition to evaluating to what extent the findings can be trusted, trustworthiness also studies how well the study persuades the audience and whether the researcher believes that the study is worth taking into account. According to Aaltio and Puusa (2011), the researcher should give grounds to why a study may be considered as trustworthy and therefore the following section will offer a thorough evaluation of this study. While evaluating trustworthiness of a research often concepts of reliability and validity are mentioned. However, using these concepts in evaluating qualitative research has been criticized. This is mainly because these concepts have emerged in quantitative research and are based on an assumption that the researcher can access objective truth (Tuomi & Sarjärvi 2017) but in qualitative research the researcher does not need to strive for objectivity, as subjective views of participants are essential (King 1994). Hence, the trustworthiness of qualitative research is required to be understood beyond these two concepts (Aaltio & Puusa 2011). As a response to these views, Lincoln and Guba (1985) identified four criteria for measuring trustworthiness in research: *credibility*, *transferability*, *dependability* and *conformability*. This model was used to analyze the trustworthiness of this study.

Their first identified criterion, as mentioned, is *credibility*. The researcher must evaluate whether his own interpretation corresponds with reality. To put it briefly, whether the information is truthful (Järvenpää 2006). In qualitative research the main criteria for credibility is the researcher himself. The reflection whether the researcher's interpretation is in coherence with the interpretations of the individuals that experienced the case is complex. The distinction between the research target and the researcher causes challenges to evaluating the credibility. In this study, a factor that may be expected to contribute positively towards greater credibility is that the researcher and the informants shared similar backgrounds and experiences, which assisted with grasping the true interpretations of the informants. In addition, there already existed an established relationship between some of the informants and the researcher and therefore, there is a strong belief that mutual trust increased the informant's willingness to share their honest experiences. Similarly, the anonymous nature of the interviews is believed to contribute to information credibility as well as the interview settings. The interviews were held mainly in calm private situations where possibility of outside disruptions was minimal.

Moreover, the researcher examined the main concepts of the study thoroughly by using trusted peer-reviewed sources. In addition, the selection of applicant interviews as a data collection method allowed drawing evidence-based arguments and therefore increase the credibility of the findings. Another mean used for increasing credibility was assuring the adequacy of empirical evidence for drawing conclusions. Interviews were conducted until it became possible to identify common themes from the responses. In this study the adequacy of empirical evidence was therefore evaluated in terms of data saturation. Data



saturation refers to a situation in which new informants start to repeat already collected data and no new knowledge emerge (Tuomi & Sarajärvi 2017). During data collection, it was noticed that in the last interviews similar perspectives were repeated and hence, new interviews were not conducted as these were not expected to bring additional information.

Second criterion Lincoln and Guba (1985) identified is *transferability*. Transferability measures trustworthiness by evaluating whether the findings of a research are applicable in other contexts. Transferability can be said to lie in the hands of those reading the research (Andres 2015). Furthermore, it may be determined by other researchers reading the study and contemplating whether any aspect of the study would be relevant for a study they want to conduct. In this study, transferability of the research was enhanced with profound methodological consideration. The study focused on providing grounds to methodological choices, which is believed to increase transferability. For example main challenges commonly connected to using interviews for data collection were identified and analyzed. Additionally, the findings of this study were compared with findings of past literature and similarities were evaluated. Similarities were detected, which indicates signs of transferability. However, the transferability of this study was limited by restricted research resources, as only informants from one recruitment process of one company were included.

Third criterion identified noteworthy while measuring trustworthiness is *dependability* (Lincoln & Guba 1985). Dependability is evaluated through considering how much the researcher and the context have affected the findings and whether the study may be repeated. In other words, it aims to show that the findings are consistent. This can be evaluated by considering whether a true understanding of the research method and their effectiveness can be obtained from the text. This can be enhanced by providing operational detail of data collection and the research design, to mention a few. In this study, the research design was explained in detail in chapter 5 to strengthen dependability. On the other hand, the inexperience of the researcher with the interview method may have limited this. However, the influences of this were aimed to be diminished with in-depth familiarization of interview techniques.

The fourth criterion that Lincoln and Guba (1985) determined for evaluating trustworthiness is *confirmability*. Shenton (2004) described confirmability as qualitative investigator's comparable concern to objectivity. To ensure confirmability, the researcher should seek to assure that the findings are the result of the informants' experiences rather than the preferences of the researcher. One limitation to the confirmability of this study is the fact that the researcher had also experienced a similar recruitment process as the informants and this may be expected to cause challenges in separating subjective experiences from this study. However, this challenge was identified in the beginning of the research and was consciously kept in mind throughout. This is believed to have assisted with evading challenges connected to having the researcher's

own subjective views intervene. In addition direct quotes from the original materials have been used to elaborate findings. This is believed to strengthen the confirmability of the research findings. Finally, the level of reflexivity has been intended to be kept high for example through honest and thorough description of research beliefs. An attempt to analyze the trustworthiness of this research was made by evaluating the presence of four criteria: credibility, transferability, dependability and conformability. The analysis has identified distinctive factors both for and against of the study being trustworthy. Thorough consideration on methodological choices was detected as a characteristic that contributes towards higher trustworthiness whereas relying the empirical part fully on subjective opinions of interviewees was detected to decrease the trustworthiness. Factors damaging trustworthiness have been tackled by assuring high transparency and open discussion on research challenges and biases.

## **6 APPLICANTS' PERCEPTIONS ON EMPLOYER IMAGE FORMATION**

### **6.1 Personal experience of the recruitment process**

KIBS organizations in competitive labor markets are facing new challenges while recruiting due to intensifying globalization, aging workforce and increasing workforce mobility. The war for talent is forcing organizations to develop strategies to become the employer of choice. For KIBS organizations it is particularly important that organizations are successful in recruiting talented applicants as their operations are based on the application of expertise knowledge (Wojtczuk-Turek 2017). One factor past literature has identified as a mean contributing towards successful battles in the war for talent is employer image. Employer image refers to perceptions of the organization as an employer and while favorable, draw applicants intensively towards. During a recruitment process, organizations employer image is likely shaping. In order to design recruitment process that supports development of positive employer image organizations need to understand how employer image develops during recruitment. Eight applicants who applied to the case organization's trainee program were interviewed to gain deeper understanding on the factors that play a role in the formation of employer image during recruitment. The recruitment process they went through consisted of multiple phases. First the applicant familiarized himself with the job advertisement that was posted on the company's website. Then the applicant sent an application through the company's recruitment platform. Upon completion of this application applicants were invited to do a video interview. Based on the video interview applicants were invited to the next stage of the selection, which consisted of individual or group interview and evaluative test. Once these were completed the company informed the applicant on the final decision.

After studying applicant perceptions through the interviews, it is evident that employer image is developing during the recruitment process. All informants recognized changes in their employer image perceptions during and/or after the recruitment process. Analysis of the interviews revealed that all informants acknowledged the recruitment process as a mean to evaluate the organization as an employer and personal fit to the organization. All applicants interviewed also showed signs of motivation to secure the applied vacancy. As discussed earlier, people are likely to find themselves in environments that reflect or correspond their personal values and needs. Similarly, job seekers value potential employers based on the match between their values and the characteristics of potential employer.

*“As an applicant you value highly that there is a good atmosphere in a company and look for a place where you would fit in. I was applying for a work place where I could see myself.” (I1, interview 11.11.2019)*

All respondents indicated signs of critical thinking while reflecting the recruitment process and its influence on employer perceptions. This may indicate further challenges for employers as in addition to challenges with increased competition over job applicants, the applicants are consciously evaluating potential employers during recruitment and afterwards.

The analysis indicated that in many cases the employer image formation had started before the recruitment process. Seven out of eight informants had a preliminary image perception of the company as an employer. These perceptions often had derived from information received from peers or friends, from previous workplaces or educational institutes, or from social media. Additionally, five out of eight informants mentioned academia-institute partnerships as a preliminary information source. In KIBS industry it seems to be common for organizations to do collaborations with universities when looking for potential recruits. This may indicate that KIBS organizations should engage in university collaborations as this could be an opportunity to influence the initial perceptions of potential future applicants. Initial perceptions, if positive, can be expected to intensify attraction towards the employer. However, overall the perceptions the applicants had before the recruitment process officially started remained rather vague.

*“I recognized the company by name and had knowledge of the service offerings, but if someone would have asked what is the difference between the company and a competitor I wouldn’t be able to say.” (I1, interview 11.11.2019)*

*“I knew that the company has big turnover and that it is a big global player. - - I had general information on the industry but I would say I had no specific information.” (I8, interview 18.12.2019)*

The one informant who did not have any perceptions or knowledge of the company informed that due to this he did a research on the company, which indicates that all respondents had developed their own perceptions of the company before actually sending an application to the recruitment process. However, as mentioned, the perceptions remained vague and therefore organizations have possibilities to influence the employer image perceptions in the early stages of recruitment.

Furthermore, the transcript analysis showed support for earlier research findings of Lievens and Slaughter (2016) that each interaction point in recruitment process may influence employer image perceptions. The respondents received varying signals from different characteristics during the process and made a variety of different conclusions on these. The perspective on employer image builds up according to different characteristics of the recruitment process, which taken together forms a holistic employer image perception.

*“I would say that the whole recruitment process influenced to a great extent as you received new information.” (I1, interview 11.11.2019)*

Certain recruitment process characteristics were reflected directly to the applicants' opinions of the employer. The transcript analysis showed that informants used similar adjectives while describing the recruitment process and the company as an employer. In other words, characteristics of the recruitment process seemed to correspond directly with employer image descriptions. For example, I4 while asked to describe the company expressed the following:

*“Fast-paced and determined. It is quite surprising that in one to two workdays one can make a decision that let's hire this one. - - but yes like fast-paced and determined.” (I4, interview 25.11.2019)*

These views suggest that the recruitment process, in fact, can have major influence on holistic perceptions of an organization.

The findings indicated that the way employer image develops during recruitment is prone to past experiences. How an applicant's personal experience developed during the recruitment process was subject to the applicant's past experiences. Generally, respondents with more experience on recruitment processes indicated more reflective thinking while evaluating this recruitment process. On multiple occasions informants compared this recruitment process to their past experiences. While the informants explained how they experienced this recruitment process, often perceptions were supported with examples of past recruitment processes experienced.

*“As a positive factor in recruitment process I could mention if applicants are kept well informed during the recruitment process. Earlier I have been in situations where I have been rejected and then eight weeks later all of a sudden, they reached out saying that sorry we had technical difficulties and would like to interview you. Or then it may take five months and you receive no information.” (I1, interview 11.11.2019)*

These findings support the view that employer image formation during recruitment is a highly subjective experience. In practice, applicants experienced different practices used during the recruitment process differently. Additionally, even though informants went through the same or highly similar recruitment processes, they reported diverse employer images at the end of the process. Therefore, one organization can have many different employer images in the eyes of applicants. This indicates challenges for organizations to create practices, that influence this process in a favorable way. Despite employer image formation being a subjective process, the informants also reported similar conclusions on certain factors. The findings section will continue evaluating individually how certain recruitment process characteristics and activities influence employer image formation and clarifying what can be done to make a favorable impact in this process.

#### **6.1.1 Applicant attraction**

*“Job advertisement does affect a lot. You get already the primary image.”  
(I5, interview 27.11.2019)*

As expected due to long history of studying employer image formation together with attraction (Lievens & Slaughter 2016), the way organization attracts applicants was found to have an influence on image perceptions. The informants shared their experiences in relation to the job advertisement, website design and the application form. Several informants identified the job advertisement as a mean to form a picture of the position and the organization. Mostly it was recognized as a mean to form a holistic image of the company and evaluate personal fit to the exact position. While evaluating the job advertisement the informants identified different reasons for what eventually made them apply for the position. Most commonly mentioned factors that made the applicant send the application was perceived personal fit to the position, conversations had with friends and level of internationality in regards to the organization and the position. Six out of eight informants brought up compatibility of personal attributes with the job characteristics as a determining reason to apply.

*“My education fully corresponded with the position I applied, which was the main reason for me to apply.” (I7, interview 29.11.2019)*

*“Instantly it seemed as my thing when I saw that they were looking for international person who likes to coordinate and it really just sounded just*

*like my thing. - - The advertisement said that you will succeed in this trainee position if you have this, this and this and all of these were a match.” (I4, interview 25.11.2019)*

Various informants emphasized the importance of having the desirable applicant characteristics clearly stated in the job advertisement. This made it possible for the applicants to evaluate whether their own backgrounds would fit the position. Detailed description of job characteristics was identified to assist in imagining how the job would be like in real life. It also assisted in evaluating whether it would reflect the applicant's own skills. The informants were especially looking for information on practical tasks that would be part of the job.

*“It was comprehensively and concisely described what the position includes and you got a picture and could imagine how the job would be like and what would it take from you and evaluate whether you could do it or not.” (I2, interview 11.11.2019)*

Detailed descriptions on the job advertisement assisted applicants to form image perceptions and hence, seem to offer organizations a way to influence image perceptions during recruitment. Detailed position descriptions also may assist organizations to attract applicant groups with certain desired characteristics by clearly promoting these in the advertisement. That way, HR professionals during recruitment can target recruitment processes to a limited and controllable number of applicants.

However, it should be ensured that job advertisement is written in a manner that reflects the truth. One of the informants identified that at first sight she did not find the job advertisement particularly interesting. However, after discussing it with a friend and after receiving encouragement, she called to HR for further information on the job characteristics. After these discussions, she reflected upon her experience as follows:

*“If I wouldn't have called I wouldn't have gotten the honest real picture of what the job includes as the person they were looking for differed quite a bit of what was said in the job advertisement. - - If I hadn't called I would've never applied for the job because I thought after reading the job advertisement that I had no chances of getting the place so why would I even apply.” (I1, interview 11.11.2019)*

By giving a wider perspective on the job characteristics organizations are less likely to cause any applicants to rule themselves out of the recruitment process. Job advertisements may be therefore, beneficial to create in cooperation with HR and employees of the team

that is looking to hire to ensure that truthful and comprehensive description of the job characteristics will be included.

Another factor that the informants generally recognized as positive in a job advertisement was promotion of personal development possibilities. Attraction towards the position and the employer increased when possibilities for personal development were mentioned in job advertisement.

*“It sounded like the kind of position where know-how is actually required and that they were looking for persons who are motivated and ready even for a bit more challenging work so I took it as a personal challenge and thought it was interesting. I remember this was one factor that made me apply.” (I2, interview 11.11.2019)*

These views indicate that applicants may be encouraged to apply by promoting possibilities for personal growth. By bringing up career development opportunities organizations can increase attraction towards the employer as this can lead to an image as an employer who supports employees' personal development.

The informants generally emphasized job characteristics over organizational characteristics while considering whether to apply for the job. However, three informants brought up that there were few organizational characteristics included. Two of them reported that they would have hoped to get more information in general about the organization in the job advertisement. One informant identified a short description of organizational characteristics as an essential part of a job advertisement. However, another informant acknowledged that there is more public information on organizational characteristics available and therefore, organizations should consider giving more weight to job characteristic and particularly express what type of individual would be applicable to the job. What was identified important is that general information about the organization should not take room away from job characteristic, but could be more of a shorter introduction in the advertisement. From organizational characteristics, values were seen as an opportunity to evaluate how it would be to work in an organization.

*“I think that organizations values are never pulled out of the air and therefore attracts individuals who appreciate similar values in a place of work.” (I8, interview 18.12.2019)*

The informants had similar employer images of all rivaling KIBS organizations prior to the recruitment process. Therefore it is important that during attraction organization promotes organizational characteristics to differentiate from competitors.



In terms of technology behind the attraction methods, applicants consciously evaluated convenience. Interestingly, even though past literature has identified aesthetics as one major element influencing development of image perceptions during attraction (Lievens & Slaughter 2016), the informants did not report observations on the organization's website design or the aesthetics of the job advertisement. This may have been as Walker et al. (2011) identified that the more familiar a job seeker is with the organization the more minor the affects of website design to image perceptions. However, as informants generally reported vague image perceptions of the company before the recruitment, this cannot explain the lack of influence of website design to image perceptions. What was found is that poor experiences with technology were connected to impaired perceptions towards the organization. Technology-wise simplicity, easy-to-use and straightforwardness were appreciated.

All of informants used internet as a primary channel for job search. Four out of eight informants reported that they had found the advertisement from their school recruitment website. Three informants identified that they found the advertisement from LinkedIn. Organizations targeting to hire recent or soon-to-be graduates should hence assure, to their best ability, that they, have presence and visibility in these channels. All applicants were satisfied with the used technology. However, it was recognized that notable inconveniences in the attraction phase may even have consequences in terms of whether the applicant is willing to continue with the recruitment process or not.

*“If applying takes painstakingly creating one’s own profile to somewhere and then updating information there, it makes you turn away from the process and loose interest as you have to put so much effort compared to just sending an application and CV.” (I2, interview 11.11.2019)*

*“The easier the application form is the easier it is to apply. You get negative feelings if you have to type in each date differently or if the system crashes. It affects quite a lot.” (I1, interview 11.11.2019)*

This indicates that organizations should drive to create easily accessible and usable attraction processes. In case of any challenges faced, applicants evaluated the ease of finding and getting assistance. One way for organization to minimize the negative effects of system disfunctions or application challenges is to assure that appropriate help is available and can be accessed effortlessly.

According to the above findings, attraction is a great determinant of initial image perceptions of the company and the position. Attraction provides applicants a way to evaluate compatibility of personal attributes with job characteristics and organizational characteristics. With that being said, the above findings can also be used to support earlier

findings of Nolan et al. (2013) that job advertisements can be easily manipulated and used to influence employer image and also to provide further practical recommendations. These have been gathered to the below table.

Table 4 Overview of the research findings on the influence of attraction

Tactic	Major findings	Implications
Job advertisement	Detailed descriptions on the position and the organization assisted applicants to form image perceptions of the employer.	Organizations are encouraged to include truthful and detailed descriptions on position and organizational characteristics to the job advertisement.
Job advertisement	Applicants want to be able to evaluate compatibility of personal attributes with the job characteristics. Perceived personal fit is often determinable reason to apply to work for an employer.	Organizations should especially include detailed information on position characteristics to the job advertisement.
Job advertisement	Attraction towards employer increased when possibilities for personal development were included in the job advertisement.	Organizations should include information on career development opportunities on the job advertisement.
Application form: Technology used	Applicants value simplicity, easy-to-use and straightforwardness while leaving the application.	Organizations can minimize the negative effects of system disfunctions or application challenges by assuring that appropriate help is available and can be accessed effortlessly if needed.

As table 4 presents, applicants value detailed descriptions of organization and position on job advertisement. Generally, applicants consider job characteristics as more important than organizational characteristics. Applicants link positive perceptions to detailed descriptions of desired applicant characteristics as this assists them in evaluating personal fit to the organization. Technological issues may be vital in terms of continuation of the whole process but can be overcome through assuring availability of proper assistance. Organizations could be able to contribute to formation of favorable employer image by

acknowledging possibilities for future personal growth while attracting recently graduated or soon-to-graduate applicants.

### 6.1.2 Selection of candidates

Selection process was expected to have a role in forming the applicants' employer image. This is because selection methods often offer a variety of interaction points and therefore, countless cues according to which the image may develop. How organizations during selection treat applicants influences whether an applicant accepts a job offer. The recruitment processes that the informants took part in consisted of video interview, face-to-face interview, networking session and evaluative test. Four out of eight informants brought up the length or the multi-phased nature of the selection process. This was considered as positive and negative factor. However, generally applicants were pleased with the used selection methods and considered the fact that selection consisted of various phases a positive factor.

*"I was surprised of how long the process was. - - Absolutely it was a positive surprise. I considered it so that either I get the job or don't get the job but it was anyway cool or developing for oneself to get to attend all the phases whatever the end result is. Maybe next time I will be wiser and more experienced." (I8, interview 18.12.2019)*

Even though some of the informants considered the selection process as rather tough, instead of being overwhelmed by the process length, these informants considered the various phases as a learning opportunity. Additionally, the informants expressed that the fact that the selection process consisted of multiple phases indicated that the employer wanted to put effort to knowing the applicants and to evaluating their suitability to the position and the organization. This led to perceptions of high-quality and professionalism. However, one of the informants noted that this may also be frustrating if the applicant is not accepted to the position.

In terms of the job interview, informants paid attention to the atmosphere, questions, settings, techniques and participants. From these, informants drew various conclusions in terms of how they perceived the employer. One informant reported that during the interview it was easier to form an image compared to the other phases where there was less interaction.

*"Interview atmosphere, if that's bad you easily get a bad image of the whole employer." (I3, interview 20.11.2019)*

Negative perceptions were connected to aggressive interview techniques where pressure is put to providing an answer. One informant expressed that these types of interviews lead to feelings of discouragement and perceptions of low respect towards employees. On the contrary, interviews in which the interview technique is to create more open conversation were perceived positively. Informants repeatedly expressed that they enjoyed the interview as it consisted of one more formal interview session and one more informal networking session. The informal networking session provided the applicants an opportunity to discuss with current team members. Especially when applicants went through the open networking session first they felt more relaxed going to the formal interview with HR and team managers.

*“We were with two current team members in an open space, it wasn’t a meeting room, and it was more of a laid-back situation and we got to ask questions about the job and there they didn’t interview us but we interviewed them and got to know to the other applicants. - - In my opinion it was really nice because I had first the laid-back interview and it calmed me pretty much which was really nice.” (I4, interview 25.11.2019)*

Especially the informal networking sessions were seen as a great opportunity to get more knowledge of the employer and that way gain more comprehensive image. Multiple informants while reflecting on what was particularly successful in this recruitment process mentioned the inclusion of this informal session with current team members. This was mostly reasoned by acknowledging that it provided an opportunity to get to know the current employees of the team they were applying to. Interactions with the team members assisted in creating more relaxed atmosphere and because of this applicants were able to get more out of themselves. Additionally, inclusion of multiple team members to the selection process was considered as a positive factor and as an indication that the employer invests in selection.

In regards to the interview questions, it was noticed that applicants draw clues from the content of the questions. It was recognized that the informants related the content to what they see that the employer appreciates or values.

*“They asked really good questions - - and most likely about matters that are important to this company and you got a picture of what they were looking for. - - For example, in the video interview they asked about internationality and instantly you got a perception of what they are looking*

*for - - and that they are looking for these types of people and that this company is this kind of place to work.” (I8, interview 18.12.2019)*

This may indicate that organizations have opportunities while planning the interviews to include to the questions attributes that it wishes to be connected with and that way influence the formation of employer image. Furthermore, applicants observed the interview settings. It was identified that visiting the premises during the selection process assisted applicants with getting clearer image of the employer. Generally, informants reported that visiting the premises had positive impact. Especially having interviews in more open settings was recognized as an indicator that the employer invests in comfort. These findings may suggest that during selection applicants should be granted the possibility to visit the company facilities as this is likely to contribute to formation of clearer employer image.

In relation to interview participants, informants often brought up that there was a combination of HR employees and team managers present. Inclusion of team members to the selection process was seen as a positive factor, as they assisted applicants evaluate the employer:

*“In my opinion it is always a good sign that you have managers in the interview and not only recruiters - - in the interview phase it is also the applicant’s job to think that is this a workplace where I want to be, do I get a good feeling or is this a horror place.” (I4, interview 25.11.2019)*

Two informants identified that interviewer characteristics such as dressing led to more relaxed perceptions of the employer. Five out of eight informants reported that they had rather stiff or hard image perceptions of the employer before the process. The informants connected this perception to multiple competing organizations in KIBS industry. During the recruitment process however all five informants identified that their employer image perceptions developed towards a more relaxed direction, which was considered as a positive factor. Based on these findings KIBS organizations could be encouraged to use selection practices that differentiate themselves from the industry’s general “hard employer” image. In addition to recruiter characteristics, a great determinant towards more relaxed perceptions was the way the selection was arranged and particularly including the informal networking session to the selection process. According to the findings, aiming for more open and relaxed selection process is likely to contribute towards positive perceptions among young professionals. However, professionalism was also acknowledged and therefore, inclusion of selection methods such as evaluative testing, which I5 recognized as an indication of professionalism, may be beneficial.

It may be concluded that these findings support the findings of past literature that selection activities as often highly interactive recruitment activities play a key role in employer image formation. Likewise, these findings provide support to earlier research (Honkala et al. 2014) findings that particularly interview questions and company premises provide information to the applicants and therefore influence formation of employer image. However, as seen in the below table, besides interview questions and settings the findings indicated that used interview techniques, participants and interview atmosphere may also play a role in employer image formation.

Table 5 Overview of the research findings on the influence of interviews

Tactic	Major findings	Implications
Interview technique	Applicants perceive positively combination of informal and formal sessions.	Organizations are encouraged to add informal networking session in addition to more formal interview to selection process.
Interview participants	Applicants perceive positively inclusion of multiple team members.	Organizations should include current team members as a part of selection process in addition to HR employees.
Interview settings	Applicants reported clearer perceptions of employer after visiting company facilities.	Organizations should arrange selection as a face to face interaction in their facilities.
Interview atmosphere	Applicants relate negative perceptions to interviewers who put lot of pressure in getting answers.	Organizations are encouraged to use more conversational interview technique.
Interview questions	Applicants draw conclusions of the employer based on the content of the interview questions.	While designing the interview questions organization should include attributes it wishes to be connected to.

As table 5 indicates, the interview technique of combining informal and formal interview sessions was seen as a positive contribution to employer image. In terms of interview participants organizations are encouraged to include multiple team members to the selection process. Regarding interview atmosphere more conversational interviews should be used. Taken together, these findings support Honkala et al. (2014) findings that through planning and preparation an organization can improve the possibility of having

positive influence to employer image formation. Therefore, it may be encouraged that organizations aim for carefully planned and designed selection processes.

### 6.1.3 *Decision delivery*

Past literature has identified that organizations have the possibility to influence employer image formation during the decision period (Kauhanen 2012, 88). The transcript analysis revealed some evidence to support these findings. However, generally informants did not acknowledge the decision period as a great determinant of employer image perceptions. What was found is that informants were pleased with the quick schedule between selection and decision and perceived this as a positive factor. Delayed decision delivery created perceptions that the organizations would keep applicants as a backup if the applicants who were first intended to be hired would refuse. In these cases, delay in delivering the hiring decision created perceptions of unappreciation. Organizations therefore can improve applicant perceptions by reducing delay between selection and decision publication. This is in line with earlier findings of Lievens and Slaughter (2016) and Becker et al. (2010). Furthermore, organizations should strive to transparency during decision period in terms of decision reasoning and status.

Delivering the decision by phone was perceived positively, especially when the applicant had reached the later stages of the recruitment process. Additionally, one informant described that especially when the recruitment process is long and includes multiple phases organizations should consider providing grounds to the hiring decision for applicants who were not selected. One informant identified that not calling to inform the decision impaired employer image perceptions momentarily. This informant had gone through the whole recruitment process.

*“I would have expected at latest when they made the final decision, from such a big company with good reputation, that they would have called.”*  
(I6, interview 28.11.2019)

These views that the informant reported support the findings of past literature that communication that does not match with expectations tends to lead to dissatisfaction (Wilden et al. 2010). It was recognized that in the earlier stages of recruitment an applicant is often satisfied with the decision being informed by email. Few informants reasoned this by stating that they understand that in the beginning of the process there is often high volume of applicants and therefore organization cannot contact everyone personally. The above findings suggest that even if decision period was not acknowledged as a strong determinant of employer image, organizations may yet use certain practices

here to shape employer image perceptions. Especially, in the later stages of recruitment processes, organizations may contact those applicants who were not selected personally by phone and provide feedback to them. This may be expected to contribute to creating positive last impressions of the employer. However in order to be confirmed, this suggestion requires further empirical evidence.

#### **6.1.4 The role of current employees**

The informants frequently made observations based on the behavior of current employees who were involved in the recruitment. In addition the informants closely interpreted communication with current employees while making conclusions of the employer. Interacting with current employees and hearing their experiences assisted the applicants to see what type of people are working for the employer. Close contact with current employees during recruitment was seen as a positive factor. Six of eight respondents identified clearly that the employees involved in the recruitment had an influence on their perceptions of the company. All of these six informants connected employees involved with positive perceptions of the employer. In fact, four out of eight informants identified current employees as a greatest single factor having shaped their employer image of the company. This indicates that applicants often consider current employees as credible sources of information during recruitment and trust to build their perceptions according to current employees' behavior. Involvement of current employees was also reported to shape the image of the employer to a more personal direction.

*“Yes, the involvement of the team members in the recruitment process influenced a lot the image I got from the organization, because the employee had lot of knowledge on how is the job in practice in that specific team. The HR personnel didn't necessarily know especially about that specific team so it had a big influence in a positive way. This was maybe because the team member gave a picture that they have a good team spirit in the team and somewhat relaxed atmosphere.” (I1, interview 11.11.2019)*

Hence, current employees who are part of a recruitment process are likely to influence the employer image an applicant associates with an organization. Especially informants expressed interest towards hearing experiences and opinions of those employees who were working on the team they were applying to. These findings indicate that the



employees involved can in fact have major influence on how applicants see the organization as a work place.

According to the transcripts, another factor that was considered as highly positive was the involvement of higher-level employees in the recruitment process. Respondents expressed that they felt appreciated when managerial and partner level employees participated in the recruitment process.

*“My image of the company changed because the interviews conducted happened during working hours and there was sitting two managers with over 15 years of working experience already and they are having the interviews for trainees. In a company this big in my opinion it is a good thing as it shows that the company and the team is interested in who are the new people who will join the organization. - - I got a feeling that they appreciate and absolutely the fact that higher level employees are involved in recruitment decisions has a positive influence.” (I4, interview 25.11.2019)*

In addition I8 reported that recruiter behavior created feelings that there is a high level of appreciation towards individuals. The informant reported that the fact that the employees involved in the interview were good in taking contact led to feelings of being appreciated. Another factor that increased the feeling of being appreciated was that during the informal networking session the employees stayed available late, which allowed more time to discuss and ask questions, and came outside to say bye when the applicants left. These factors led to perceptions that the employer has high appreciation towards employees. As high appreciation towards individuals led to positive image perceptions, organizations should invest in indicating appreciation towards job applicants and their efforts.

The informants also emphasized the role of current employees in evaluating their personal fit with the organization. The findings indicate that if applicants are able to imagine themselves working with the team members involved in the recruitment process they are likely to be more attracted to the organization. Involvement of multiple current employees assisted applicants in imagining how it would actually be to work in the organization. One of the informants recognized that the involvement of current employees was a way for her to evaluate the organization.

*“The fact that I got to contact with different team members and received more information of the company confirmed that this would be a good match for me. I think this was very positive in the sense that it also provided me an opportunity to evaluate X as an employer from different perspectives and see what the company emphasizes.” (I1, interview 11.11.2019)*

According to the above, it may be suggested that organizations should assure that the employees involved in the recruitment processes are trained and have the adequate skills to carry out a successful recruitment process. Training the employees involved in recruitment is important as the transcript analysis showed support that applicants used similar adjectives to describe recruiter characteristics and the company. I7 described recruiter behavior as professional and identified that recruiter behavior influenced perceptions of the whole company. Later on, the same informant while asked to describe the whole company instantly mentioned professionalism.

The informants also recognized that the way current employees interacted with each other also had an influence on how they view the company.

*“In the interview situation when one of the team members asked something another one may have added something. - - I got instantly a feeling that they work very well together.” (I8, interview 18.12.2019)*

*“When there were two employees of the team involved in the interview I got a feeling that in their team there is good atmosphere based on what they were saying and based on their internal communication.” (I6, interview 28.11.2019)*

Informants reported that evaluating internal communication between the employees led to increased perceptions of communality, teamwork and cooperation. However it may be challenging for organizations to influence employer image formation by manipulating the interactions of current employees as personal connections are subjective and therefore cannot be controlled. Perhaps involving more than one employee may be beneficial as then the evaluation would not be based solely on one contact. I4 brought up personal chemistry with the recruiter as influential factor and expressed that poor personal chemistry between an applicant and recruiter may lead to negative perceptions. These views also give support to including multiple employees to the recruitment process. Additionally, seeing current employees interacting with each other created stronger desires for applicants to apply for the organization. Organizations should recognize that applicants are looking to evaluate the organization and provide opportunities for them to do so, by for example involving more than one team member to the recruitment process.

Based on informants' personal views it may be concluded that human contacts with current employees are a major determinant of employer image. In fact, the findings indicate that employees involved shape employer image formation strongly during recruitment.

*"Absolutely, it is human reports and human contacts of what employer image is formed of." (I8, interview 18.12.2019)*

The characteristics informants used to describe the organization after the recruitment process correlated with recruiter characteristics. In addition internal communications of employees was used to evaluate personal fit to organization. These findings strongly suggest that organizations should invest in assuring that the right people are involved in recruitment. Additionally, organizations should assure that applicants have possibilities to hear experiences of current employees. For example, experience reports of current employees on the company website were identified as a positive factor. These were seen as an effective way to form perceptions of the employer. Most importantly, current employees with knowledge of the day-to-day job should be included in the recruitment process. Furthermore, it may be beneficial to include managerial level employees, this was found to increase perceptions of appreciation towards individuals.

## **6.2 The role of communication in employer image formation**

According to the findings of the literature review, it was expected that communication would prove to be a significant determinant of employer image during recruitment. The transcript analysis found that employer image is closely related to information available about the employer. This is in line with the findings of past literature that all organizational images are related to available information (Gatewood 1993). Communication in fact, received considerable discussion time during the interviews. Applicants reported employer image perceptions being shaped according to recruitment messages communicated. While discussing factors which shaped applicants' employer images, all informants acknowledged the influence of communication.

*"Communication is very important for me in a recruitment process." (II, interview 11.11.2019)*

It may therefore be argued that communication, as expected, was found to be significant determinant of employer image. Whereas Cable and Turban (2001) explored the influence of communication to employer image during recruitment through categories of employer, job and people information, the findings of this study showed support for different categorizing. The following sections will focus on elaborating what is the role of message source, communication channel as well as message content and delivery, and how applicants evaluated the influence of these. Factors within these categories were

mentioned by the informants and therefore, the categorization was found suitable for the analysis in this study.

### **6.2.1 Interpreting different message sources**

Current employees involved in the recruitment process were generally perceived as honest and trusted sources of information and communications with them shaped applicants' perceptions of the employer. Additionally, informants reported to be pleased with getting relatively much time to discuss with current employees. Hence, organizations may be encouraged to ensure that there is ample time available for open conversations between employees and applicants.

*“[One of the recruiters] said that there is a nice atmosphere or nice working atmosphere and that it is nice to come to work and it seemed that they meant it.” (I8, interview 18.12.2019)*

*“What stayed in my mind positively is that rarely you get a chance to get to talk to employees and you receive very positive and even honest feedback of what it is like to work in a company.” (I1, interview 11.11.2019)*

Especially, respondents valued employee referrals and brought these up commonly during the interviews. As mentioned, employee experiences were seen as a way to form a clearer image of how it would be to work for the employer. With these findings, recommendations of Walker et al. (2008) that organizations should provide employee comments so that applicants would be better able to assess their fit with an organization can be fully supported. Clearer images were reported to lead to stronger desires to apply for the position.

*“I looked up experiences of previous employees and from there got an idea of what type of jobs there are, what had been their feelings and what type of backgrounds they had. - - But yes, it definitely strengthened by desire to apply.” (I8, interview 18.12.2019)*

Moreover, in terms of internal recruitment communication, the transcript analysis showed that having a single point of contact contributed to the creation of mutual trust and assisted applicants feel more comfortable with sharing personal matters.

*“I already had a face [for the company] so I knew who I was talking to and it was easier to ask.” (I4, interview 25.11.2019)*

*“I think it was a really good thing because I knew instantly if there was a message from [the recruiter] it was related to this. - - I think it was really consistent, there was no fuss with the emails and it was really clear.” (I8, interview 18.12.2019)*

Additionally, I4 informed that once a communication channel with one single point of contact was opened the process went a lot smoother. Organizations could be encouraged to clearly address who is responsible for providing additional information in case of any questions. That way organizations could assure that applicants have a clear channel for getting more information, which furthermore is likely to lead to clearer employer image perceptions.

In addition to the employees involved in the recruitment process, majority of the respondents had received before the recruitment or continued to receive throughout the recruitment information about the employer through personal links. Five out of eight informants consulted friends or acquaintances who they knew were working with the company during the recruitment process. These current employees were however completely detached from the recruitment process, but proved to have an influence on employer image perceptions that were formed during the recruitment. This means that the formation of employer image during recruitment is not only subject to controlled recruitment information that the company and recruiters provide but also to uncontrollable information that other employees provide. Hence, the findings turned to support the view that employer image perceptions that are created during recruitment cannot be fully controlled as informal communications with current employees tend to have great impact in shaping the employer image in the minds of external individuals (Knox & Freeman 2010).

These friends, who were current employees of the company at the time of recruitment, yet not part of the recruitment, were seen as a highly trusted source of information. This is because due to established personal relationships, friends were expected to be honest while confronted about their perceptions towards the employer. The transcript analysis showed that at points their opinions were in fact trusted more than the employees who were unfamiliar but involved in the recruitment process.

*“I put emphasis way more to what my friends tell me honestly and what is their opinion and so on. For me I valued that a lot more versus who I met during the selection.” (I1, interview 11.11.2019)*

I1 furthermore described that image perceptions of these friends were easily adopted. The informant also recognized discussions with friends as a single most important factor that made the informant apply for the job. This suggests that there is a close connection between internal employer image that current employees poses and external employer image. When current employees perceive their employer positively it is likely that they transfer similar perceptions to external people. Lack of such personal connection may lead to applicants' perceptions to be more in line with discussions with recruiters, however, more empirical evidence is required to confirm this.

What was found interesting in the findings is that none of the informants acknowledged that during the recruitment, communication with completely external individuals would have played a role in forming employer image. As Collins and Stevens (2012) earlier identified, word-of-mouth communication can have strong effects on employer image, but according to these findings it is likely to apply to word-of-mouth with only current or previous employees of the company. Hence, it may be concluded that according to these findings the most influential message source in terms of employer image formation during recruitment is the current employees. Taken further, applicants seem to put most emphasis on communications with friends who are current employees but outsiders to the recruitment process. Employer images of these friends were even directly adopted. With these findings Knox and Freeman's (2006) arguments that interpersonal communications with current employees are more powerful in shaping employer image than communication published by the firm itself can be fully supported. Organizations may be able to design recruitment messages that promote factors that are considered to support creation of favorable employer image, however employees are required to deliver and reinforce these messages. Organizations may never be fully able to control what each employee communicates, however, through for example training, guidelines and strong internal employer branding organizations can encourage employees to adapt and portray desired employer image.

### **6.2.2    *Perceptions on used communication channels***

In relation to the communication channels used during attraction, all informants reported that they conducted job search through internet and mainly through social media, and particularly through LinkedIn. I5 reported that if an organization is using a physical newspaper to recruit, it creates feeling of not being on the same wavelength. Therefore, especially for KIBS organizations while aiming to recruit recent or soon-to-be graduates, using social media as a communication channel is vital, particularly during attraction.

This is also in line with earlier research findings of Sivertzen et al. (2013) that organizations should be conscious of their social media presence and exploit social media while informing potential applicants.

The transcript analysis showed that the later stage applicants achieved in the recruitment process the more attention they put towards interpreting the used communication channels. As mentioned, applicants tended to report understanding towards using mass communication channels such as email in the first phases of recruitment as they acknowledge that applicant volumes were high. The analysis indicated that the greater the effort applicant put towards the recruitment the stronger the applicant's expectations on used communication channels were. When applicants moved further in the selection process, they increasingly reported desires towards using more personal communication channels.

*"Application always takes a day or 8 hours to do and then I already did the video interviews which I think had 3 questions and I think I really put an effort in those and then just got an email." (I4, interview 25.11.2019)*

When an applicant's expectations do not match reality it often leads to feelings of dissatisfaction, as in this case as well. Applicants used their past experiences as a reference point, while evaluating the used communication channels. This indicates that how applicants interpret the use and effectiveness of different communication channels is subjective to applicants' previous recruitment experiences.

*"Generally, I am used to that when you invite applicants to an interview, even at that phase you would call." (I5, interview 27.11.2019)*

The transcript analysis showed that phone calls as communication channel were perceived more personal and indicated higher appreciation towards applicants compared to emails. I6 reported feeling that the more personal the communication is the more important the recruitment process becomes.

*"Somehow the contact through phone - - [signals] that applicants are humans and we are treated as individuals. When you get an email, you get a feeling that okay now there are so many applicants that they don't have time or don't want to bother calling." (I5, interview 27.11.2019)*

Especially while informing the final decision, multiple informants emphasized the importance of delivering the decision by using the phone as a communication channel. These findings suggest that organizations should use communication channels that allow

personal focus. Informants were pleased that the organization provided call slots for inquiring further information already during attraction. In two cases where the informants used these call slots, these calls strengthened the attraction to apply. As these types of call slots often provide an opportunity for the first more personal contact between an applicant and the employer, it is important that they are available and that the current employees who are assigned to take these calls are trained accordingly.

In relation to the communication channels used for interviews, face-to-face settings were perceived more positively compared to video and phone interviews. I7 for example reported negative perceptions towards phone interviews as they do not allow observing recruiters' reactions. Using video interviews where employer has pre-recorded the questions was detected not to play a major role in the formation of employer image due to a lack of interactive contact. However, organizations may aim to influence formation of employer image also during these type of video interviews by shaping interview questions. According to the earlier research findings of Allen et al. (2004), face-to-face communications with involved employees had a strong influence on employer image formation. Generally, informants reported stronger changes in their employer image perceptions when they had reached the phase of recruitment where face-to-face communication was used. Availability of face-to-face communication assisted informants to form clearer images of the employer in terms of what type of people work in the organization and how it is to actually work there. Additionally, face-to-face communicated messages were commonly trusted and assumed factual. Therefore, the findings of this study can be used to support the arguments of Allen et al. (2004).

As the above analysis demonstrates, the communication channels used can impact how strong is the influence of communicated messages in forming employer image. To assure formation of desirable employer image organizations should aim to use communication channels that allow a higher sense of personality, as this assists reinforcing communicated recruitment messages. Face-to-face interviews seem to play a stronger role in shaping employer images compared to video and phone interviews. The influence of used communication channels on applicants' perceptions increases the further the recruitment process proceeds as applicants become more invested in the process. Therefore, it may be concluded that the further the recruitment process proceeds the more personal communication channels should be used.

### **6.2.3    *The importance of message content and delivery***

The transcript analysis revealed that applicants received various clues of the employer from recruitment messages and drew distinct conclusions based on the content of these



messages. Informants made observations particularly on what information was included, how this information was placed and what was the sensed level of personality in these messages. Informants reported recalling specific information included in written messages communicated. For example, the informants reported detailed information on what was included in the job advertisement. This indicates that applicants recall relatively well what an employer states in a job advertisement, which therefore could provide an opportunity to promote attributes that support the formation of a desirable employer image. In addition to evaluating the message content in job advertisements, organizations are encouraged to consider suitable placement for different messages. I1 informed that during attraction while scrolling through the job advertisement there was lot of text and because of this, she missed the details for the call sessions. This indicates that recruiters must carefully evaluate where to place different pieces of information so that vital information will not be overlooked. Details for the call sessions, as found already, are especially important, as they are likely to improve applicants' perceptions and increase attraction.

Furthermore in terms of message content, informants reported positive perceptions towards personally targeted messages. Organizations can increase sense of personality by addressing mass emails by name to applicants. Additionally, addressing applicants' individual questions quickly and thoroughly was reported to lead to perceptions that each applicant is considered seriously and faced in an inclusive way. I6 identified that personalized communication leads to feelings of appreciation and to positive perceptions. The transcript analysis showed that by careful designing of recruitment message contents organizations can create higher sense of personality and that way shape the formation of employer image towards a more personal direction.

In terms of delivering messages, informants valued recruitment processes where applicants are kept actively up to date on the progress of the process. In particular, informants reported that it is important that after sending the application, further information on process continuation is received quickly. Commonly informants reported to be pleased that the job advertisement already included a detailed description of the recruitment process schedule. Providing a recruitment timeline for the whole process was perceived positively as it allowed applicants to know when to expect the next message to be delivered.

*“What was especially good during the recruitment is how the company shared information on the different phases of the recruitment process.”  
(I1, interview 11.11.2019)*

*“I think it was a good thing that the applicant was kept up to date all the time on what was happening. - - It was well controlled, the whole process, which was good.” (I2, interview 11.11.2019)*

In fact, active message delivery was seen as a way of building trust. Providing detailed information on the recruitment schedule created feelings of being able to trust that someone will get back to you. The transcript analysis also showed that in case the set schedule cannot, for any reason, be followed, applicants should be kept informed on all delays. Applicants indicated that when a schedule is given it is expected that it will be closely followed. Informants also seemed to pay attention to all possible infringements on given schedules. One of the informants explained that she had been informed on the schedule of the recruitment, but the interview invitation came later than stated and this led to temporary feelings of disappointment.

*“For a while I was really disappointed but then I received the invitation. Maybe they should make the time during which they say they will inform longer so there wouldn’t be this feeling that they promise things but don’t keep them.” (I8, interview 18.12.2019)*

*“I appreciate a lot that if there are any delays or anything that they would be informed.” (I5, interview 27.11.2019)*

Majority of the informants related negative recruitment experiences precisely to poor message delivery during recruitment. Six out of eight informants identified bad communication as a typical characteristic for bad recruitment processes. I3 expressed that not sending any response after receiving an application gives a very bad image of the company. This indicates that communication plays a major role in employer image formation during recruitment.

Generally, informants reported that they were pleased with the amount and content of recruitment messages received. According to these, they were able to form a picture of the employer and the position. Overall, recruitment communication that consisted of informative messages was perceived positively.

*“As a positive point I could mention if during recruitment candidates are kept very well informed.” (I1, interview 11.11.2019)*

I5 identified that one of the factors that influenced employer image formation the most was the recruitment messages sent through email, as these messages were very

informative, as the informant described. These findings support the arguments of Kauhanen (2012) that mere exposure to information is a way to influence employer image. Promises given during recruitment influence the expectations of applicants and their evaluations of the employer. Common points that the informants brought up while considering the characteristics of a good recruitment process were connected to the schedule of the process. Holding on to a communicated schedule created highly positive perceptions among all respondents. It may therefore be concluded that in recruitment messages it is important to actively include information on the recruitment schedule and the next steps. As a conclusion on the above it may be stated that communication plays a major role in employer image formation. Furthermore it was found that the influence of communication has on employer image depends on the message source, the communication channel used and the message content and delivery. To elaborate in more detail how message content influences the formation of employer image during recruitment the next chapter will explore the way informants draw clues on various of attributes that were included in recruitment messages.

### **6.3 Relation of instrumental and symbolic attributes in employer image formation**

During a recruitment process applicants receive countless messages, that contain countless attributes, based on which they make observations on the company as an employer. Hence, employer image is built on attributes that individuals relates with an organization when they think about it as a place of work. As expressed earlier, past literature has identified two different groups for such attributes: symbolic and instrumental (Lievens & Slaughter 2016). The informants made observations on symbolic attributes such as internationality and atmosphere and on instrumental attributes such as industry and dress code. Interpreting and observing these different attributes influenced the evaluations that applicants made of the employer.

The informants' past and moreover recent employment experiences influenced what attributes, whether symbolic or instrumental, they emphasized while evaluating the employer. I1 told that she had left her previous workplace because she did not feel that the organization was a good fit for her. Because of this she now emphasized the fit between personal skills and values, and organizational opportunities and needs. Similarly, I5 expressed that she had had bad experiences in her former workplace in relation to workplace training and now elaborated that the job advertisement was positively memorable as it promoted personal training support for all new employees. These findings suggest that the way an applicant values different attributes and draws

conclusions of the employer based on these is a subjective process. All respondents were rather conscious of the factors they valued and searched for in a new place of work.

Most of the applicants were able to identify clearly, which factors influenced the formation of their employer images most. In each interaction point during the recruitment process, informants reported drawing conclusions based on identified attributes. Especially during highly interactive recruitment activities, such as interviews, informants reported observing a variety of signals on symbolic and instrumental attributes. Particularly informants made many observations on attributes that were found different compared to expectations. Informants reported having rather stiff images of the employers in KIBS sector prior to the recruitment process and during the recruitment process observed attributes that indicated differently. The later stage the applicant reached in the recruitment process, the clearer employer image formed. Coming out of the recruitment process seven out of eight informants reported that based on the process they would recommend the company as an employer. This indicates that the company was able to shape employer image perceptions positively and differentiate. Then, which attributes did the company promote or the applicants observe that led to these positive employer image perceptions?

The observations informants made on instrumental attributes were divided into two groups: organizational factors and employment factors. Organizational factors represent instrumental attributes that are connected to physical, concrete aspects related to the organization as a whole. Employment factors on the other hand are related to the specific job applied. Taking a closer look, the below figure indicates those instrumental attributes that were observed by the informants in this study. The size of the bubble illustrates the frequency of mentions made on the attribute.

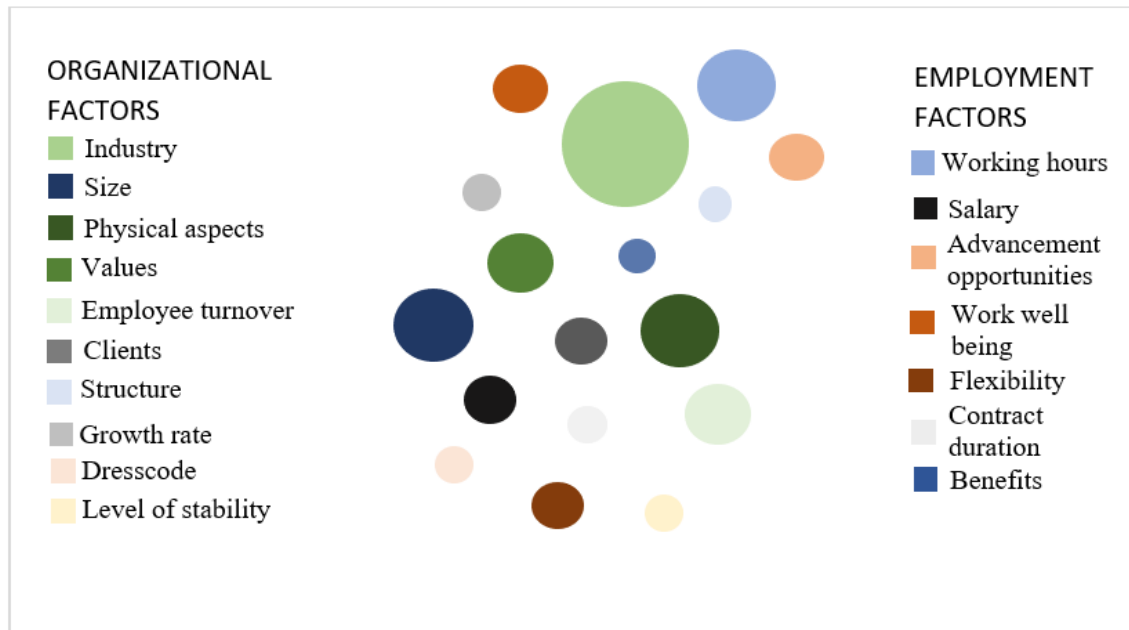


Figure 7 Observations on instrumental attributes

As seen from figure 7, most frequently evaluated instrumental attributes included industry, company size, physical aspects, and working hours.

Most observations on instrumental attributes were made during attraction and selection. It seems that instrumental factors were relatively easily observed without any physical interaction with the company employees. Informants reported to have conducted preliminary researches on the company through the internet, especially during attraction and while preparing for selection. Many of the instrumental attributes that have been categorized under the organizational category are public information that informants came across during these preliminary searches. On the contrary, instrumental attributes that fall under employment factors were mostly evaluated during selection and at later stages of the recruitment process. Instrumental attributes that informants reported to have directly related to employer image perceptions were dress code, physical aspects and working hours. This indicates that both organizational and employment factors play a role in forming employer image. I7 reported that during selection visiting the company facilities led to more clear and positive image perceptions. I4 on the other hand reported that how employees were dressed during the selection created perceptions of a more modern and youthful employer. Two of the eight informants mentioned salary as a key factor that they considered to be important while evaluating places of work. This could be explained as in KIBS industry the salaries of trainee level positions tend to be very similar and therefore do not provide much room for differentiation. Also the times advancement opportunities were discussed remained low, which is in contrast with the expectations on what recent graduates would value, as they are only in the beginning of their work careers. However, this may be explained by the higher number of observations

made on level of learning and challenge, which are similar factors but fall under symbolic attributes.

Young applicants are evaluating companies through various aspects beyond salary and advancement opportunities. Generally, informants reported more observations on symbolic attributes than instrumental attributes and developed employer image perceptions more based on symbolic attributes. The below figure represents the symbolic attributes observed and the frequency these were observed while discussing with the applicants about evaluations of the employer.

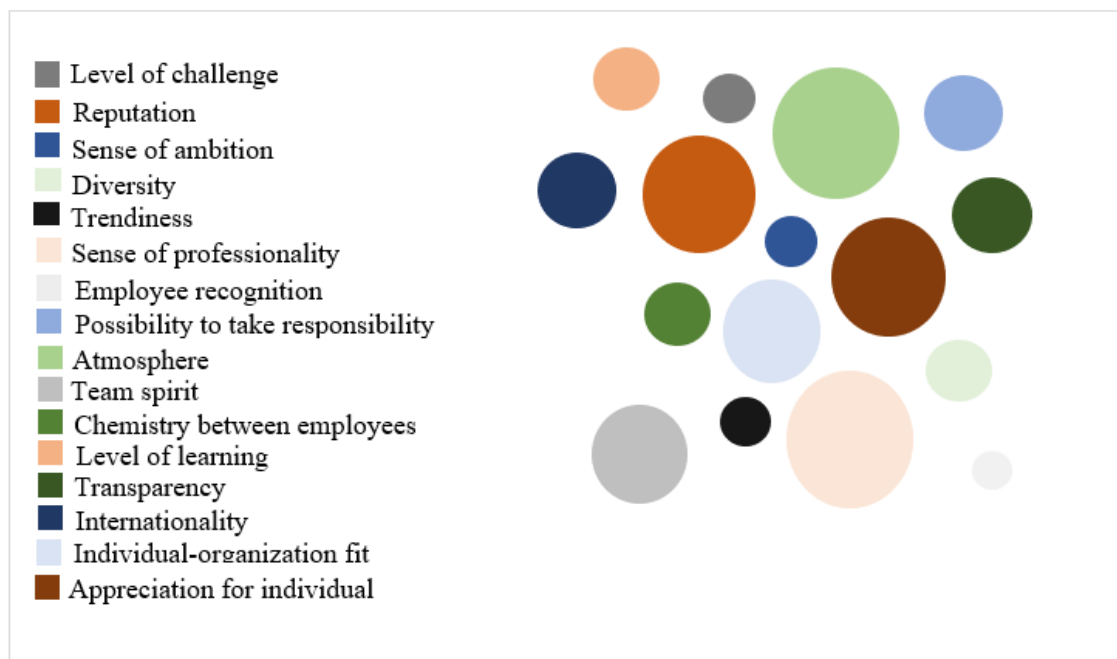


Figure 8 Observations on symbolic attributes

As per figure 8, the analysis of the transcripts showed that themes including atmosphere, sense of professionalism, reputation and appreciation for individual were among the most frequently mentioned factors. Informants reported that the observations they made on atmosphere, reputation and appreciation for individual improved their employer image perceptions in the sense that they did not perceive the employer as hard or stiff. Therefore KIBS organizations may be encouraged to promote these attributes to young job applicants. The informants made most observations on symbolic attributes during interactive face-to-face settings. The informants reported positive perceptions towards recruitment activities that allowed the evaluation of these attributes. For example, as mentioned, applicants commonly perceived highly positively that they were able to observe how current employees interacted with each other. Based on these interactions, informants reported observations on team work and atmosphere. Organizations are

encouraged to ensure that applicants have adequate opportunities to detect signals of symbolic attributes. Symbolic attributes that informants reported that directly correspond with their employer image perceptions include atmosphere, sense of professionalism, level of learning, level of challenge, team spirit, internationality, transparency and possibility to take responsibility. For example, I7 reported sensing high level of professionalism from the recruiter behavior and while asked to describe the company as an employer emphasized professionalism.

Additionally one of the more frequently observed symbolic attribute was individual-organization fit. The findings suggest that attraction towards an employer may be explained by the extent the attributes promoted during recruitment correspond with the applicant's personal traits or the self-image they wish to display. In fact, informants reported evaluating personal fit to organization by mirroring their personal values to organizational attributes promoted. It was detected for example that multiple applicants perceived positively promotion of high level of internationality because they felt that this symbolic attribute reflected their own backgrounds and desires. This then led to greater attraction towards the employer.

*"It had all that I thought I would be good at, like being active and interested in internationality - - and it reflected my personality." (I5, interview 27.11.2019)*

Perhaps these findings reveal why symbolic attributes were given more emphasis and correlated more strongly with perceptions of the employer. Symbolic attributes are matters that are relatable, where as instrumental attributes such as salary or location do not provide the applicant the possibility to be related to. This also may indicate that organizations have possibilities with promoting specific symbolic attributes to gain applicants that would also share similar attributes. For instance, in case an organization during recruitment strongly promotes independent working atmosphere, individuals who value this highly may be more likely to be drawn to the employer.

As a conclusion, it may be said that an applicant's employer image often consists of a combination of instrumental and symbolic attributes. Informants were using attributes from both clusters while describing their employer image of the company after the recruitment process. However it seems that the traditional attributes often connected to the work place or employer evaluation are dissolving and new attributes are gaining higher meaning. The findings suggest that KIBS organizations looking to differentiate and hire recent graduates should put emphasis on promoting symbolic benefits in building a favorable employer image. Endorsing factors such as professional development and good work atmosphere could be more beneficial than promoting salary conditions. In fact, these findings are in line with the previous research findings of Van Hoyer and Saks (2011)

that organizations are better differentiated on the basis of symbolic attributes than on the basis of instrumental attributes. However, instrumental attributes may not be overlooked, as they often demonstrate the utilitarian value to applicants. Promotion of symbolic attributes may require more efforts as they are often better demonstrated in interactive face-to-face settings rather than written on a job advertisement or company website, which can be used to promote instrumental attributes. Furthermore what was found is that there was interconnectivity between the attributes. For example instrumental attribute dress code was directly related to symbolic attribute of sense of professionalism. This indicates that promoting one attribute organizations can have an influence on another attribute as well.

It may be concluded that the analysis of the transcripts has confirmed that all factors taken into closer evaluation, applicant's personal experience on used recruitment activities, communication and symbolic as well as instrumental attributes play a role in employer image formation. The results showed that applicants make conclusions of the employer based on the way organization attracts applicants, the way organization selects candidates and based on the way organization informs applicants about the final hiring decision. In addition organization's current employees shape applicants' employer image. Moreover recruitment communication published by the firm itself and discussions with employees have a major role in shaping applicants employer image. Taking a closer look message content, message source and the communication channel used influence applicants' perceptions. Finally, applicants' employer image was found to be shaped by symbolic and instrumental attributes that applicants observed during the whole recruitment process.



## 7 CONCLUSIONS

### 7.1 Discussions

In this study an investigation of the relation between recruitment and employer image was conducted to identify critical factors organizations should focus on while building employer images. In order to find out what could be done, the aim was to describe and analyze how employer image is formed during recruitment process. This was done by analyzing perceptions of recent and soon-to-be graduates in KIBS industry. Here it is important to remind that the recommendations that will be provided are based on findings of a study conducted in one industry with applicants from a restricted target group and therefore, may not be applicable as such in other settings. Besides to the study findings, this final chapter will present the contributions of the study, limitations of the study and potential future research avenues. However, the main purpose of this chapter is to provide an answer to the research question: *How employer image develops during recruitment?*

In finding an answer to this question, we shall start with the findings related to the research sub-questions. The first research sub-question set was: *What is the role of communication in shaping employer image during recruitment?* In finding an answer to the first research sub-question, the findings were determinant. In fact, the findings of this study are evident and place communication in the center of this phenomena. An applicant's employer image is directly related to information available of the employer and therefore, the role of communication is to be a significant determinant of employer image that develops during recruitment. More precisely, during a recruitment process applicants interpret different communication channels and sources as well as evaluate message content and delivery. Conclusions made on these factors then relate to applicants' perceptions of the employer. Therefore the influence that communication has on applicants' employer image depends on the channels and sources used as well as the content of the communication. Current employees of a company are perceived as a highly trusted source of information and therefore are given strongest emphasis while drawing conclusions about the employer. Completely external sources play a minimal role in the formation of employer image during recruitment. The further the recruitment process proceeds, the more communication channels that allow personal focus should be used as these are found to have positive influence on employer image. During face-to-face interactions, organizations are best able to shape applicants' employer image. In terms of message content and delivery, personalized and informative messages as well as active message delivery are related to positive perceptions.

Secondly this study aimed to clarify: *How does the applicant's personal experience on used recruitment activities influence employer image formation?* The way an applicant

experiences used recruitment activities and how different activities influence employer image perceptions is a highly subjective process and prone to the applicant's past experiences. At the end of recruitment process there are likely to be as many employer images as applicants. Applicants recognize that recruitment is not only a possibility for an employer to evaluate the suitability of applicants, but also a possibility for applicants to evaluate the employer. Each recruitment activity taken into closer examination, attraction, selection, decision and employees involved, influences employer image formation. Based on each of these recruitment activities, applicants evaluate their personal fit to the position and employer. Organizations must be alert throughout the whole recruitment process while aiming to implement interventions to shape employer image as efforts during one activity may be overcome by lack of effort in another activity. Active interaction in between the recruitment activities is important in terms of maintaining favorable employer image.

How an applicant experiences attraction is a great determinant of initial employer image perception and determines the continuation of the recruitment process. Organizations who promote self-development and assure convenience in attraction are likely to contribute towards positive applicant experience and moreover to the creation of favorable employer image perceptions. In KIBS industries, young professionals often possess a preliminary employer image of the company they are applying to. This preliminary image is commonly based on information gained from academia-company partnerships or friends and family prior to the start of the recruitment process. However, these images are often vague and hence the more recruitment activities are experienced, the clearer employer image perceptions tend to be. Selection as the most interactive recruitment activity proved to be the most influential to employer image formation. During selection, the role of current employees in shaping applicants' experiences and moreover employer image perceptions is highlighted. Inclusion of multiple current employees to the recruitment process is beneficial in terms of applicant experience on used recruitment activities and employer image formation. The reasoning behind this argument is two-fold. Firstly, because that way the formation of employer image perceptions will not be solely based on a single contact, as the consequences may be negative if personal chemistry is impaired. Secondly, because that gives the applicant an opportunity to evaluate the team atmosphere and level of communality, which young professionals tend to relate to positive employer image perceptions. Additionally, the way an organization delivers the final decision may influence employer image perceptions. In particular, applicants evaluate their experience during the decision period in terms of the communication channels used and whether adequate grounds for the decision are provided. Delivering the decision by phone and providing reasoning behind the decision are often perceived positively.

Finally, an answer to the third research sub-question: *What is the role of instrumental and symbolic attributes in building employer image during recruitment?* must be presented before an answer to the main research question may be expressed. Employer image formation is prone to observations applicants make during recruitment on a variety of instrumental and symbolic attributes. In answering what is the relation of symbolic and instrumental attributes in employer image formation during recruitment, it can be said that symbolic attributes tend to play a bigger role in shaping young professionals' employer image perceptions. This is because young professionals are evaluating potential employers mostly through observing personal fit to an organization and symbolic attributes better enable identification with an employer. Feelings of identification are sought by comparing personal traits with observed organizational traits. Young professionals are observing potential employers especially in terms of work atmosphere, professionalism, appreciation towards individuals and possibilities for personal growth and learning. However, instrumental attributes do not go without acknowledgement, but explain a smaller, incremental variance in shaping employer images. In particular, dress code and facilities also shape applicants' employer images during recruitment. Instrumental attributes such as pay did not serve as a strong point for differentiation, whereas applicants regularly brought up symbolic attributes as valuable.

With the above being said, this study may move on to presenting an answer to the main research question: *How employer image develops during recruitment?* Firstly, with the findings of this study it may be affirmed that recruitment process influences applicants' employer images and the formed images may have significant implications on the recruitment process and after. It was found that during variety of recruitment activities individual applicants receive countless of messages from different sources through variety of channels that contain an array of different attributes according to which employer image perceptions develop. Therefore, employer image develops during recruitment according to different characteristics of the process, which taken together forms a holistic employer image. Employer image perceptions during recruitment influences applicants' behavior and the recruitment results. As recruitment is an experience that can have significant impact on a company's external employer image it is important that the process of how it develops is studied in the context of recruitment.

## **7.2 Theoretical conclusions**

Because KIBS organizations are highly important to the development of the economy, mainly due to their high innovative capacity, recognition of practices that allow them to achieve fine performance is significant theoretical issue (Wojtczuk-Turek 2017). This study has contributed to this discussion by identifying practices that contribute towards

successful talent attraction by studying how employer image develops during recruitment. Successful talent attraction is vital for KIBS industries as they gain competitive advantages through recruiting high potential employees (Sommer et al. 2017).

This study has confirmed the findings of past research (Lievens & Slaughter 2016) and proved that the recruitment process shapes employer image. The above discussion on the influence of recruitment on employer image introduced a large number of individual variables that were found to have an impact on applicants' employer image. In this study, findings of past literature on individual factors influencing employer image formation during recruitment were supported and also new factors were identified. As earlier research has identified (Kauhanen 2012; Honkala et al. 2014; Lievens & Slaughter 2016), this study confirmed that attraction, selection and decision period all play a role in forming applicants' employer images and therefore can be manipulated to shape employer images to a desirable direction. As most attention in past recruitment research (Collins & Stevens 2002; Roberson et al. 2005; Walker et al. 2008; Agrawal & Swaroop 2011; Kashive & Khanna 2017) has been given to studying the early stages of recruitment and their influence on employer image formation, this study has contributions especially in terms of how individual practices used at later stages of recruitment impact.

This study has strengthened earlier findings (Honkala et al. 2014) that as selection is commonly a highly interactive phase of recruitment it plays a key role in employer image formation. Moreover this study identified individual factors within the selection process that shape the influence selection practices have on employer image formation. These include company premises, interview questions, recruiter behavior, interview techniques and settings. A combination of informal and formal interview sessions provides a great opportunity for applicants to evaluate the employer and therefore often contributes strongly to employer image formation. In terms of the impact of decision period, like past literature has identified (Kauhanen 2012; Becker et al. 2010), this study found that there is a relationship between an organization's actions during the decision period and applicants' employer images. By reducing delay between selection and decision publication and by contacting also applicants who were not chosen organizations can contribute to the creation of positive employer image perceptions. Moreover, this study provided further understanding on why applicants commonly consider these actions positively and relate these to the formation of positive employer image. It was found that the later the stage the applicant achieves in the recruitment process, the greater the effort put towards the recruitment and the higher the expectations in terms of publishing the final decision. Contacting applicants who were not chosen and providing them grounds for the decision creates perceptions of appreciation towards the individual applicant, which compensates the effort put to the recruitment process, and therefore is commonly perceived positively.

Like earlier research has identified (Van Hoyer & Lievens 2007), this study proved the strong influence current employees play in forming applicants' employer images during recruitment. In fact in this study it was identified that current employees involved in the recruitment may not have the strongest influence on employer image formation. In case an applicant has a close personal connection to a current employee external to the recruitment process, this person is likely to have greater impact on employer image formation than the employees involved in the recruitment process. In terms of communication, in accordance with past research (Cable & Turban 2001) it was found that communication influences employer image during recruitment. In fact, it was found that communication is a major determinant of employer image formed during recruitment. Whereas Cable and Turban (2001) earlier studied the influence of communication through categorization to employer, job and people information, this study recognized further communicational categories that are useful in seeking deeper understanding of the influence of communication on employer image. It was found that applicants make observations in terms of communication channels, message sources as well as message content and delivery. Applicants' interpretations on these factors influence the conclusions they make about the employer.

Furthermore, this study confirms the suitability of implementing the symbolic-instrumental framework to studying employer image formation during recruitment as found in earlier research (Lievens & Highhouse 2003). Past research has demonstrated especially the importance of symbolic attributes in formation of employer image during recruitment (Lievens & Slaughter 2016), and this study provides support to these findings. Additionally, in this study it was found that this is because symbolic attributes enable comparison between personal traits and employer traits, and therefore create feelings of identification. This moreover leads to the formation of a clearer and stronger employer images. Additionally, further information on what symbolic attributes applicants relate to employer image perceptions were found, including work community atmosphere, sense of professionalism, internationality and promotion towards professional growth.

In addition to the identification of individual factors such as communication, recruitment activities as well as symbolic and instrumental attributes, this study observed and presented a framework of the interaction of these variables and the holistic influence of them on employer image. To the best current knowledge, the holistic influence of this group of variables have not been presented nor studied. Therefore, this study has contributed to the existing literature on recruitment and employer image. Additionally, there has not been published studies on employer image formation for young professionals in KIBS industry and therefore, this study has also generated new contextual knowledge. These findings contribute to the growing interest in the field of recruitment and employer image because they bring new practical views that are related to improving organizations image as an employer. In KIBS industry knowledge on

practices that ensure organizations access to optimal knowledge resources as mentioned is vital (Wojtczuk-Turek 2017). The following chapter will present the practical suggestions that this study discovered.

### **7.3 Managerial implications**

According to the findings, it is evident that organizations should acknowledge the importance of exploring and developing opportunities to influence employer image formation during recruitment. Now that deeper understanding on how employer image forms during recruitment has been gained, practices to influence this process and contribute towards the creation of favorable employer image may be presented. Organizations are encouraged to design practices that lead to the formation of clear employer images, as they are expected to support the likelihood of joining a company. Organizations are also encouraged to invest in planning, designing and implementing the factors identified here to contribute towards the creation of favorable employer image throughout the whole recruitment, as applicants are actively evaluating employers during each stage of the process. Applicants' leverage is growing due to the intensifying war for talent, and this is likely to explain why applicants are increasingly showing signs of critical evaluation towards an employer during recruitment.

In order to support initial attraction towards an employer, organizations can shape initial employer image of recent and soon to be graduates through involvement in academia-institute partnerships. During attraction, organizations are encouraged to exploit practices that were found in this study to contribute towards clearer and positive employer image perceptions, and hence stronger desires to apply. These practices include inclusion of detailed descriptions especially on position characteristics, promotion of personal development opportunities as well as exploitation of easy-to-use technology and assurance of convenient access to support in case of any disfunctions. Detailed descriptions of the position and organizational characteristics in the job advertisement assist applicants in evaluating personal fit to the organization, which among recent and soon to be graduates is a common reason determining whether or not to apply for a position. Promotion of personal development on the other hand increases attraction towards an employer and builds up an image as an employer who supports employees' personal growth. Moreover, applicants relate positive perceptions towards convenience in used attraction methods and value the availability of assistance during application period if challenges arise. Organizations looking to hire recent and soon to be graduates are encouraged to ensure, to their best ability, presence and visibility in LinkedIn and

university recruitment websites, as these were identified as main channels for job search among this target group.

While designing selection methods, organizations are encouraged to exploit a combination of formal and informal interview settings as this supports the creation of more comprehensive employer image. Besides this, organizations are encouraged to arrange selection in their own facilities as this likely contributes towards the formation of clearer employer image. In terms of interview techniques, organizations can use more open conversation to create positive perceptions. Moreover, interview questions can be used to promote desirable employer image. Organizations can manipulate question contents and include factors that they wish to be connected with and thereby support the formation of a desired employer image. For example, in case an organization wishes to be identified as an international employer, the interview questions should be shaped to include this factor. Finally, during selection, organizations can assist applicants in gaining clearer employer image by involving multiple current employees to selection so applicants can make interpretations based on the way employees communicate with each other. Inclusion of multiple current employees is commonly perceived positively among young job applicants. While informing the final decision to applicants, organizations are encouraged to minimize delay between selection and decision publication and seek transparency by providing some reasoning behind the decision. These practices and delivering the final decision by phone are perceived positively among applicants. The lack of these practices especially when an applicant has reached later stages of the recruitment process can lead to impaired employer image.

Interaction with current employees supports the development of employer image towards a more personal direction, as applicants commonly consider current employees as trusted sources of information. Organizations are encouraged to assure that adequate time during recruitment is allocated for interaction with current employees. Furthermore, as applicants form perceptions of the employer according to the actions of current employees, organizations are recommended to ensure that employees involved in recruitment are trained and aware of the desired employer image. Consequently, it is recommended that organizations involve team members to the recruitment process in addition to HR professionals, as it was noted that their involvement assists applicants in imagining themselves working in the position. Furthermore, inclusion of managerial level team employees is recommended, as this creates perceptions of appreciation towards individuals.

In terms of communication, organizations can use different communication channels and message sources as well as manipulate message content and delivery to influence applicants' employer image. Organizations are recommended to provide applicants access to employee experiences during recruitment, as these assist applicants in creating perceptions of how it would be to work for an employer. Applicants who have a personal

connection with a current employee who is not involved in the recruitment are likely to put more emphasis on the friend's messages while forming perceptions of the employer rather than the employees involved in the recruitment. Therefore, organizations are encouraged to consider whether interventions in internal employer branding could be implemented to support the creation of a favorable external employer image. Additionally, organizations are recommended to exploit communication channels that allow a more personal focus. During face-to-face interaction, organizations can create stronger impacts on employer image perceptions, making them recommendable. Organizations are recommended to use personalized messages and active message delivery to achieve contributions to the formation of favorable employer image.

Finally, recent and soon to be graduates evaluate potential employers frequently in terms of industry, sense of professionalism, atmosphere, reputation and appreciation for individuals, and therefore organizations are encouraged to promote these attributes during recruitment. In addition, organizations are recommended to consider clues available during recruitment about the facilities, dress code, working hours, team spirit, development opportunities and internationality, as applicants directly relate these to employer image perceptions. While in war for talent, organizations should seek differentiation through enhanced employer image by exploring and promoting particularly symbolic attributes. While implementing interventions to shape employer image during recruitment, organizations are encouraged to define what type of an employer they wish to be in order to ensure that favorable impacts are achieved.

## **7.4 Limitations and suggestions for future research**

As is common, this study does not come without its limitations, and therefore these should be acknowledged. One weakness identified concerns the small number of informants in this study. These weaken the explanatory power and therefore raise questions on the representativeness of the research findings. Furthermore, decision-makers are encouraged to take caution while considering implementing practices on the basis of the outcomes of one, context-specific study. According to Lievens and Slaughter (2016), the effectiveness of strategies for improving image is likely dependable on the type of organization and the type of applicants it intends to attract. Similarly, other researchers have found that it is highly organization related, which practices influence positively the shaping of employer image. What may be beneficial for one organization and its employer image may be damaging for another (Collins 2007; Lievens & Slaughter 2016). This study was conducted in Finland in one industry with data from one company. Therefore, the findings need to be replicated in other countries and industries to validate and develop these



findings. Organizations are encouraged to exploit an evidence-based approach to incorporating these findings by trying, evaluating and making changes based on the findings of these evaluations.

This study has focused on external employer image and how specified recruitment characteristics influence it. As this study exclusively restricted the focus on external employer image, one future research avenue could be to expand the focus to include internal employer image. As this study already found indications that there is an interplay between these two, studying the interaction of internal and external employer images in the context of recruitment could be lucrative. More precisely, it may be appropriate to examine the role of internal marketing in this equation to reveal the potential that internal marketing practices could have through employees involved in the recruitment process to enhance the outcomes to employer image formation. Internal employer image and internally used recruitment activities could provide topics for interesting research. This could furthermore provide valuable information for organizations in terms of employee retention. Globalization is not only influencing applicant mobility but also employee mobility and hence organizations are increasingly challenged to establish means for retaining talent.

Globalization is also bringing its own challenges connected to increased cultural diversity. Therefore, one future research domain that should receive further attention is connected to cross-cultural differences in employer image perceptions. More research is required in order to provide comprehensive grounds to organizations in terms of whether organizations have further possibilities to emphasize specific attributes that could fit a culture of interest and that way ensure successful recruitment. In addition, the rather homogeneous target group that provided the empirical evidence to this study restricts the exploitation of these findings into recruiting recent or soon to be graduates. Therefore, methodologically future research could contain expanding the demographic focus of the study to contain more diversified job seekers as informants. This could be done for example by involving applicants from different age groups and experience levels. Additionally, research with a wider research context with evidence from various industries would be recommendable.

As this study focused on the formation of employer image, another possible research direction could include the potential consequences and strength of the formed employer images. This could provide further proof to organizations of the importance of designing and implementing practices that contribute to the creation of a favorable employer image. Even though holistic understanding on how employer image forms during recruitment was achieved, it remains unclear how potential variations in the strength of the formed employer image influence recruitment outcomes and applicants' future behavior. Longitudinal approach would be recommendable to use while investigating potential employer image strength variations and their long-term impacts.

## 8 SUMMARY

Due to changing demographics, the talent pool is shrinking globally and the intensified competition for talented young professionals is commonly referred to as the war for talent. It has become vital for organizations to detect means to differentiate in order to survive and thrive through this intensifying rivalry. Past literature provides a wide range of evidence supporting the view that building a positive employer image is a competitive weapon in the battle-field, as it is unique and therefore difficult to imitate. Considering this, this study studied the formation of employer image during recruitment. This study begun with merging employer image and recruitment literatures and developing an understanding of the main forces influencing employer image formation during recruitment. Individual factors that play a central role in shaping applicants' employer image perceptions during recruitment have been identified. What type of employer image perceptions are formed is highly connected to the recruitment activities used, communication evolving around the process as well as symbolic and instrumental attributes promoted and observed.

The objective of the empirical research of this study was to take a step further and gain deeper understanding of the influence of recruitment activities, communication and instrumental and symbolic attributes on employer image formation. Qualitative interviews were used to explore the studied phenomena in the eyes of job applicants. This study was performed in the context of KIBS industry and the empirical evidence was collected by observing perceptions of recent or soon to be graduates. Informant responses were recorded, transcribed and analyzed by exploiting thematic network analysis. By letting job seekers tell their experiences on recruitment, better understanding of the underlying process of what influences employer image was gained.

The findings make clear the importance of investing in recruitment planning and practices that have been found to contribute towards formation of favorable employer image. The empirical findings supported the findings of past literature on factors influencing employer image formation to great extent, but also produced knowledge on new influencing factors. Most importantly, holistic understanding on how employer image forms during recruitment was achieved, as it was found that during a variety of recruitment activities individuals receive a bundle of messages that contain attributes based on which applicants make conclusions about the employer. Multiple opportunities for organizations to influence this process and contribute to the creation of favorable employer image were identified and presented. During individual recruitment activities organizations can through communication shape the influence recruitment process has on employer image. By using current employees as message source, face-to-face settings as a communication channel and informative messages organizations can contribute towards

creation of favorable employer image. Furthermore organizations can promote symbolic attributes of atmosphere, reputation and appreciation towards individual to support creation of favorable employer image for young job applicants. With that being said, it may be concluded that the purpose of this study to produce further knowledge on employer image formation during recruitment and detect practical means for organizations to promote the creation of a clear favorable employer image was achieved.

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## APPENDICES

### APPENDIX 1 – Interview guide

#### Background questions

1. Could you tell about your background? Why did you apply for this job?
2. What aspects do you look for or value in a job in general?
3. What things do you consider to be important while searching for a job?
4. What aspects do you consider as important during recruitment process?
5. What aspects are characteristics of a bad recruitment process?

#### Communication

6. How did you hear about this job?
  - Was the advertisement easy to find?
7. How much did you know about the company before this process? What was the source of this information?
8. How would you describe the job advertisement?
  - What information was included? What stick to your mind about it?
  - Reflecting back, do you think the advertisement provided realistic description on the company and the job?
9. Did you search for additional information beside the advertisement? How? Do you feel like there was enough information available?
  - Do you feel like you got clear picture on the company and the job during the process?
10. What made you apply for this job?
11. In what ways you were contacted during the process? How did you feel about it?
  - What do you think about the communication? Do you feel like it was honest? Open? Coherent?
12. Do you feel like you received enough information?
  - Was there something you wish you would had received more information?
  - Do you wish they would have used some additional channels of communication?
13. According to this recruitment process what kind of values do you think the company has? From what could you notice this?
  - Did the company promote its values during the process? If yes, what values?
14. What would you say are the most important values for the company?

#### Experience

15. How was our image of the company as an employer before this process?
16. Did you have any expectations for this process?
17. How would you describe the recruitment process?
18. How would you describe the behavior of recruiters during this process?
19. How was technology used in this process?
  - Do you think that the usage of technology was successful?

20. Did something during the process surprise you?
21. Where there something that was done particularly well? For example what?
22. Where there something that could have been done better? For example what?
23. What do you think about the used selection methods?
  - What do you think about the used interview methods?
  - What do you think about the recruitment day?
  - What do you think about the psychological tests?
24. What do you think about the way the company informed the final decision on employment?
25. How did the employees involved affect the process?
  - Did it affect your image of the company?
26. How is your image of the company?
27. How did your image of the company change during recruitment process?
  - What do you think had the greatest influence on this?
28. How is your image of the company as an employer now?
29. How would you describe the company?
  - Would you say the company is innovative?
30. What is your perception on the organizational culture in the company?
  - What is this perception based on?
31. How did your image of the company as an employer change during the recruitment process? Why? What was the most important reason for this?
32. Could you consider of applying for this company again?
33. Would you recommend this company as an employer?
  - If your friend would ask how is the company as an employer what would you say?

## APPENDIX 2 – Invitation to the interview



Interview request letter

30.9.2019

Dear recipient,

My name is Lotta Miettinen and I am studying international business in Turku School of Economics and currently working on my Master's thesis on how recruitment process influences applicants' perceptions on employer image of a target organization. The aim is to detect ways for organizations to build convenient recruitment processes for applicants and that way achieve mutual benefits for both parties, applicant and employer. Currently I am working on a trainee program in X, however my thesis is not commissioned thesis for X and is not connected to my work. Also, I wish to emphasize that this research and participation to it will not affect by any means the recruitment process.

This research will be done by using interview surveys, to which I am inviting you to participate. I am collecting research data from individual interviews from applicants applying to 2020 X Trainee Program. This research is interested in the applicants' perceptions on the target organization's employer image and how potentially the recruitment process influences this. Participation is fully voluntary and requires one interview of 30-60 minutes that may be held face to face, over the phone or via skype. Interview data will be handled with confidence and fully anonymously. Your identity won't be revealed to anyone else but the researcher. Participants will get a chance to take a look at the result section before publication. In case you are interested in taking part of the study please contact me so I may give further information and we may agree on interview schedule.

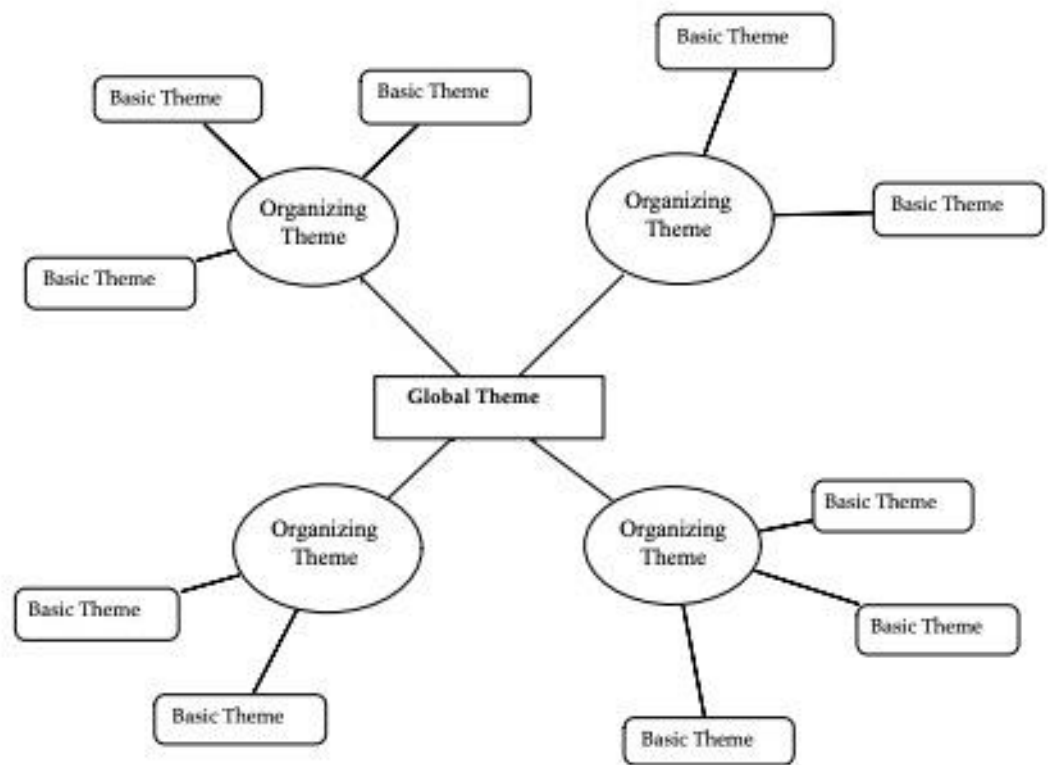
My thesis supervisors are Niina Nummela and Riikka Harikkala-Laihininen from Turku School of Economics. The completed thesis will be published online.

Kind Regards, Lotta Miettinen

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## APPENDIX 3 – Thematic network analysis



Structure of thematic network (Attride-Stirling 2001, 388)